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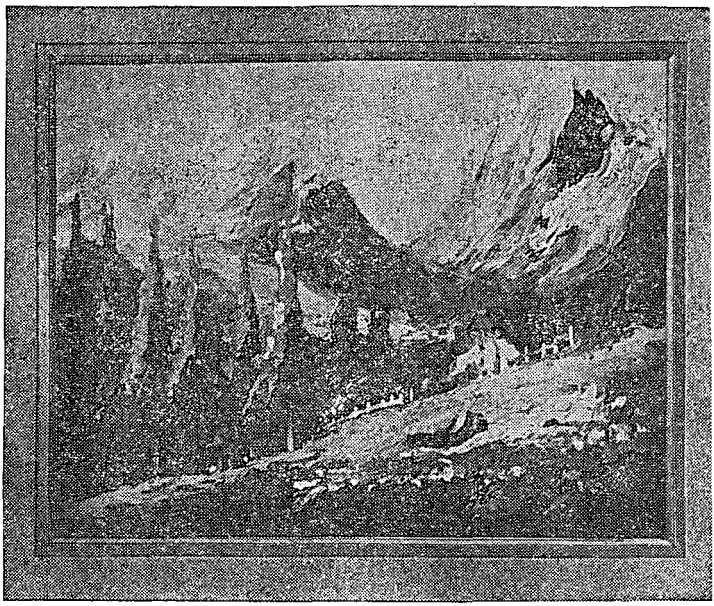

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The meeting, the attraction, the attachment, the relationship between Linda and Mark were almost like a storybook romance; and it flowered. It grew and grew—until something "darkly, starkly evil" grew with it . . .

Here is the old Woolrich magic, the growing, compelling suspense as only Cornell Woolrich feels and articulates and projects it—"like something supine waiting to spring, with just the tip of its tail twitching" . . .

FOR THE REST OF HER LIFE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

THEIR EYES MET IN ROME. ON A street in Rome—the Via Piemonte. He was coming down it, coming along toward her, when she first saw him. She didn't know it, but he was also coming into her life, into her destiny—bringing what was meant to be.

Every life is a mystery. And every story of every life is a mystery. But it is not what *happens* that is the mystery. It is whether it *has* to happen no matter what, whether it is ordered and ordained, fixed and fated, or whether it can be missed, avoided, circumvented, passed by; *that* is the mystery.

If she had not come along the Via Piemonte that day, would it still have happened? If she had come along the Via Piemonte that day, but ten minutes later than she did, would it *still* have happened? Therein lies the real mystery. And no one ever knows, and no one ever will.

As their eyes met, they held. For just a heartbeat.

He wasn't cheap. He wasn't sidewalk riffraff. His clothes were good clothes, and his air was a good air.

He was a personable-looking man. First your eye said: he's not young any more, he's not a boy any more. Then your eye said: but he's not old. There was something of youth hovering over and about him, and yet refusing to land in any one particular place. As though it were about to take off and leave him. Yet not quite that either. More as though it had never fully been there

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in the first place. In short, the impression it gave was agelessness. Not young, not old, not callow, not mature—but ageless. Thirty-six looking fifty-six, or fifty-six looking thirty-six, but which it was you could not say.

Their eyes met—and held. For just a heartbeat.

Then they passed one another by, on the Via Piemonte, but without any turn of their heads to prolong the look.

"I wonder who that was," she thought.

What he thought couldn't be known—at least, not by her.

Three nights later they met again, at a party the friend she was staying with took her to.

He came over to her, and she said, "I've seen you before. I passed you on Monday on the Via Piemonte. At about four in the afternoon."

"I remember you too," he said. "I noticed you that day, going by."

I wonder why we remember each other like that, she mused; I've passed dozens, hundreds, of other people since, and he must have too. I don't remember any of *them*.

"I'm Mark Ramsey," he said.

"I'm Linda Harris."

An attachment grew up. What is an attachment? It is the most difficult of all the human interrelationships to explain, because it is the vaguest, the most impalpable. It has all the good points of love, and none of its drawbacks. No jealousy, no quarrels, no greed to possess, no fear of losing possession, no hatred (which is very much a part of love), no surge of passion and no hangover afterward. It never reaches the heights, and it never reaches the depths.

As a rule it comes on subtly. As theirs did. As a rule the two involved are not even aware of it at first. As they were not. As a rule it only becomes noticeable when it is interrupted in some way, or broken off by circumstances. As theirs was. In other words, its presence only becomes known in its absence. It is only missed after it stops. While it is still going on, little thought is given to it, because little thought needs to be.

It is pleasant to meet, it is pleasant to be together. To put your shopping packages down on a little wire-backed chair at a little table at a sidewalk café, and sit down and have a vermouth with someone who has been waiting there for you. And will be waiting there again tomorrow afternoon. Same time, same table, same sidewalk café. Or to watch Italian youth going through the gyrations of the latest dance craze in some inexpensive indigenous night-place—while you, who come from the country where the dance originated, only get up to do a sedate fox trot. It is even pleasant to part, because this simply means preparing the way for the next meeting.

One long continuous being-to-

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gether, even in a love affair, might make the thing wilt. In an attachment it would surely kill the thing off altogether. But to meet, to part, then to meet again in a few days, keeps the thing going, encourages it to flower.

And yet it requires a certain amount of vanity, as love does: a desire to please, to look one's best, to elicit compliments. It inspires a certain amount of flirtation, for the two are of opposite sex. A wink of understanding over the rim of a raised glass, a low-voiced confidential aside about something and the smile of intimacy that answers it, a small impromptu gift—a necktie on the one part because of an accidental spill on the one he was wearing, or of a small bunch of flowers on the other part because of the color of the dress she has on.

So it goes.

And suddenly they part, and suddenly there's a void, and suddenly they discover they have had an attachment.

Rome passed into the past, and became New York.

Now, if they had never come together again, or only after a long time and in different circumstances, then the attachment would have faded and died. But if they suddenly do come together again—while the sharp sting of missing one another is still smarting—then the attachment will revive full force, full strength. But never again as merely an attachment. It has to go on from there, it has to build, to pick up speed. And sometimes it is so glad to be brought back again that it makes the mistake of thinking it is love.

She was thinking of him at the moment the phone rang. And that helped too, by its immediacy, by its telephonic answer to her wistful wish of remembrance. Memory is a mirage that fools the heart . . .

"You'll never guess what I'm holding in my hand, right while I'm talking to you . . .

"I picked it up only a moment ago, and just as I was standing and looking at it, the phone rang. Isn't that the strangest thing! . . .

"Do you remember the day we stopped in and you bought it . . .

"I have a little one-room apartment on East 70th Street. I'm by myself now, Dorothy stayed on in Rome . . ."

A couple of months later, they were married . . .

They call this love, she said to herself. I know what it is now. I never thought I would know, but I do now.

But she failed to add: if you can step back and identify it, is it really there? Shouldn't you be unable to know what the whole thing's about? Just blindly clutch and hold and fear that it will get away. But unable to stop, to think, to give it any name.

Just two more people sharing a common human experience. Infi-

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nite in its complexity, tricky at times, but almost always successfully surmounted in one of two ways: either blandly content with the results as they are, or else vaguely discontent but chained by habit. Most women don't marry a man, they marry a habit. Even when a habit is good, it can become monotonous; most do. When it is bad in just the average degree it usually becomes no more than a nuisance and an irritant; and most do.

But when it is darkly, starkly evil in the deepest sense of the word, then it can truly become a hell on earth.

Theirs seemed to fall midway between the first two, for just a little while. Then it started veering over slowly toward the last. Very slowly, at the start, but very steadily . . ..

They spent their honeymoon at a New Hampshire lakeshore resort. This lake had an Indian name which, though grantedly barbaric in sound to the average English-speaker, in her special case presented such an impassable block both in speech and in mental pre-speech imagery (for some obscure reason, Freudian perhaps, or else simply an instinctive retreat from something with distressful connotations) that she gave up trying to say it and it became simply "the lake." Then as time drew it backward, not into forgetfulness but into distance, it became "that lake."

Here the first of the things that happened, happened. The first of the things important enough to notice and to remember afterward, among a great many trifling but kindred ones that were not. Some so slight they were not more than gloating, zestful glints of eye or curt hurtful gestures. (Once he accidentally poured a spurt of scalding tea on the back of a waitress' wrist, by not waiting long enough for the waitress to withdraw her hand in setting the cup down, and by turning his head momentarily the other way. The waitress yelped, and he apologized, but he showed his teeth as he did so, and you don't show your teeth in remorse.)

One morning when she woke up, he had already dressed and gone out of the room. They had a beautifully situated front-view of rooms which overlooked the lake itself (the bridal suite, as a matter of fact), and when she went to the window she saw him out there on the white-painted little pier which jutted out into the water on knock-kneed piles. He'd put on a turtle-necked sweater instead of a coat and shirt, and that, over his spare figure, with the shoreward breeze alternately lifting and then flattening his hair, made him look younger than when he was close by. A ripple of the old attraction, of the old attachment, coursed through her and then was quickly gone. Just like the breeze out there. The little sidewalk-café chairs of Rome

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with the braided-wire backs and the piles of parcels on them, where were they now? Gone forever; they couldn't enchant any more.

The lake water was dark blue, pebbly-surfaced by the insistent breeze that kept sweeping it like the strokes of invisible broom-straws, and mottled with gold flecks that were like floating freckles in the nine o'clock September sunshine.

There was a little boy in bathing trunks, tanned as a caramel, sitting on the side of the pier, dangling his legs above the water. She'd noticed him about in recent days. And there was his dog, a noisy, friendly, ungainly little mite, a Scotch terrier that was under everyone's feet all the time.

The boy was throwing a stick in, and the dog was splashing after it, retrieving it, and paddling back. Over and over, with that tirelessness and simplicity of interest peculiar to all small boys and their dogs. Off to one side a man was bringing up one of the motorboats that were for rent, for Mark to take out.

She could hear him in it for a while after that, making a long slashing ellipse around the lake, the din of its vibration alternately soaring and lulling as it passed from the far side to the near and then back to the far side again.

Then it cut off suddenly, and when she went back to look it was rocking there sheepishly engineless. The boy was weeping and the dog lay huddled dead on the lake rim, strangled by the boiling backwash of the boat that had dragged it—how many times?—around and around in its sweep of the lake. The dog's collar had become snagged some way in a line with a grappling hook attached, left carelessly loose over the side of the boat. (Or aimed and pitched over as the boat went slashing by?) The line trailed limp now, and the lifeless dog had been detached from it.

"If you'd only looked back," the boy's mother said ruefully to Mark. "He was a good swimmer, but I guess the strain was too much and his little heart gave out."

"He did look! He did! He did! I saw him!" the boy screamed agonized, peering accusingly from in back of her skirt.

"The spray was in the way," Mark refuted instantly. But she wondered why he said it so quickly. Shouldn't he have taken a moment's time to think about it first, and then say, "The spray must have been—" or "I guess maybe the spray—" But he said it as quickly as though he'd been ready to say it even before the need had arisen.

Everyone for some reason acted furtively ashamed, as if something unclean had happened. Everyone but the boy of course. There were no adult nuances to his pain.

The boy would eventually forget his dog.

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But would she? Would she?

They left the lake—the farewells to Mark were a bit on the cool side, she noticed—and moved into a large rambling country house in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts, not far from Pittsfield, which he told her had been in his family for almost seventy-five years. They had a car, an Alfa-Romeo, which he had brought over from Italy, and, at least in all its outward aspects, they had a not too unpleasant life together. He was an art importer, and financially a highly successful one; he used to commute back and forth to Boston, where he had a gallery with a small-size apartment above it. As a rule he would stay over in the city, and then drive out Friday night and spend the week-end in the country with her.

(She always slept so well on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Thursdays she always lay awake half the night reminding herself that the following night was Friday. She never stopped to analyze this; if she had, what would it have told her? What *could* it have, if she didn't realize it already?)

As far as the house was concerned, let it be said at once that it was not a depressing house in itself. People can take their moods from a house, but by the same token a house can take its mood from the people who live in it. If it became what it became, it was due to him—or rather, her reaction to him.

The interior of the house had crystallized into a very seldom evoked period, the pre-World I era of rococo and gimcrack elegance. Either its last occupant before them (an unmarried older sister of his) had had a penchant for this out of some girlhood memory of a war-blighted romance and had deliberately tried to recreate it, or what was more likely, all renovations had stopped around that time and it had just stayed that way by default.

Linda discovered things she had heard about but never seen before. Claw legs on the bathtub, nacre in-and-out push buttons for the lights, a hanging stained-glass dome lamp over the dining-room table, a gramophone with a crank handle—she wondered if they'd first rolled back the rug and then danced the hesitation or the one-step to it? The whole house, inside and out, cried out to have women in the straight-up-and-down endlessly long tunics of 1913, with side-puffs of hair over their ears, in patent-leather shoes with beige suede tops up to the middle of the calf, suddenly step out of some of the rooms; and in front of the door, instead of his slender-bodied, bullet-fast Italian compact, perhaps a four-cornered Chalmers or Pierce-Arrow or Hupmobile shaking all over to the beat of its motor.

Sometimes she felt like an interloper, catching herself in some full-length mirror as she passed it, in her over-the-kneetop skirt and

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short free down-blown hair. Sometimes she felt as if she were under a magic spell, waiting to be disenchanted. But it wasn't a good kind of spell, and it didn't come wholly from the house or its furnishings . . .

One day at the home of some people Mark knew who lived in the area, where he had taken her on a New Year's Day drop-in visit, she met a young man named Garrett Hill. He was branch head for a company in Pittsfield.

It was as simple as that—they met. As simple as only beautiful things can be simple, as only life-changing things, turning-point things, can be simple.

Then she met him a second time, by accident. Then a third, by coincidence. A fourth, by chance . . . Or directed by unseen forces?

Then she started to see him on a regular basis, without meaning anything, certainly without meaning any harm. The first night he brought her home they chatted on the way, in his car; and then at the door, as he held out his hand, she quickly put hers out of sight behind her back.

"Why are you afraid to shake my hand?"

"I thought you'd hurt me."

"How can anyone hurt you by just shaking your hand?"

When he tried to kiss her, she turned and fled into the house, as frightened as though he'd brandished a whip at her.

When he tried it again, on a later night, again she recoiled sharply—as if she were flinching from some sort of punishment.

He looked at her, and his eyes widened, both in sudden understanding and in disbelief. "You're afraid *physically,*" he said, almost whispering. "I thought it was some wifely scruple the other night. But you're physically afraid of being kissed! As if there were pain attached to it."

Before she could stop herself or think twice she blurted out, "Well, there is, isn't there?"

He said, his voice deadly serious, "*What* kind of kissing have you been used to?"

She hung her head. And almost the whole story had been told.

His face was white as a sheet. He didn't say another word. But one man understands another well; all are born with that particular insight.

The next week she went into the town to do some small shopping—shopping she could have done as easily over the phone. Did she hope to run across him during the course of it? Is that why she attended to it in person? And after it was taken care of she stopped into a restaurant to sit down over a cup of coffee while waiting for her bus. He came into the place almost immediately afterward; he must have been sitting in his car outside watching for her.

He didn't ask to sit down; he

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simply leaned over with his knuckles resting on the table, across the way from her, and with a quick back glance toward the door by which he had just entered, took a book out from under his jacket and put it down in front of her, its title visible.

"I sent down to New York to get this for you," he said. "I'm trying to help you in the only way I know how."

She glanced down at it. The title was: *The Marquis de Sade. The Complete Writings.*

"Who was he?" she asked, looking up. She pronounced it with the long A, as if it were an English name. "Sayd."

"Sod," he instructed. "He was a Frenchman. Just read the book," was all he would say. "Just read the book."

He turned to leave her, and then he came back for a moment and added, "Don't let anyone else see —" Then he changed it to, "Don't let *him* see you with it. Put a piece of brown wrapping paper around it so the title won't be conspicuous. As soon as you've finished it, bring it back; don't leave it lying around the house."

After he'd gone she kept staring at it. Just kept staring.

They met again three days later at the same little coffee shop off the main business street. It had become their regular meeting place by now. No fixed arrangement to it; he would go in and find her there, or she would go in and find him there.

"Was he the first one?" she asked when she returned the book.

"No, of course not. This is as old as man—this getting pleasure by giving pain. There are some of them born in every generation. Fortunately not too many. He simply was the first one to write it up and so when the world became more specialized and needed a separate tag for everything, they used his name. It became a word—sadism, meaning sexual pleasure got by causing pain, the sheer pleasure of being cruel."

She started shaking all over as if the place were drafty. "It is that." She had to whisper it, she was so heartsick with the discovery. "Oh, God, yes, it is that."

"You had to know the truth. That was the first thing. You had to know, you had to be told. It isn't just a vagary or a whim on his part. It isn't just a—well, a clumsiness or roughness in making love. This is a frightful thing, a deviation, an affliction, and—a terrible danger to you. You had to understand the truth first."

"Sometimes he takes his electric shaver—" She stared with frozen eyes at nowhere out before her. "He doesn't use the shaver itself, just the cord—connects it and—"

She backed her hand into her mouth, sealing it up.

Garrett did something she'd never seen a man do before. He

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lowered his head, all the way over. Not just onto his chest, but all the way down until his chin was resting on the tabletop. And his eyes, looking up at her, were smoldering red with anger. But literally red, the whites all suffused. Then something wet came along and quenched the burning in them.

"Now you know what you're up against," he said, straightening finally. "Now what do you want to do?"

"I don't know." She started to sob very gently, in pantomime, without a sound. He got up and stood beside her and held her head pressed against him. "I only know one thing," she said. "I want to see the stars at night again, and not just the blackness and the shadows. I want to wake up in the morning as if it was my right, and not have to say a prayer of thanks that I lived through the night. I want to be able to tell myself there won't be another night like the last one."

The fear Mark had put into her had seeped and oozed into all parts of her; she not only feared fear, she even feared rescue from fear.

"I don't want to make a move that's too sudden," she said in a smothered voice.

"I'll be standing by, when you want to and when you do."

And on that note they left each other. For one more time.

On Friday he was sitting there waiting for her at their regular table, smoking a cigarette. And another lay out in the ashtray, finished. And another. And another.

She came up behind him and touched him briefly but warmly on the shoulder, as if she were afraid to trust herself to speak.

He turned and greeted her animatedly. "Don't tell me you've been in there that long! I thought you hadn't come in yet. I've been sitting out here twenty minutes, watching the door for you."

Then when she sat down opposite him and he got a good look at her face, he quickly sobered.

"I couldn't help it. I broke down in there. I couldn't come out any sooner. I didn't want everyone in the place to see me, the way I was."

She was still shaking irrepressibly from the aftermath of long-continued sobs.

"Here, have one of these," he offered soothingly. "May make you feel better—" He held out his cigarettes toward her.

"No!" she protested sharply, when she looked down and saw what it was. She recoiled so violently that her whole chair bounced a little across the floor. He saw the back of her hand go to the upper part of her breast in an unconscious gesture of protection, of warding off.

His face turned white when he understood the implication. White with anger, with revulsion. "So that's it," he breathed softly. "My God, oh, my God."

They sat on for a long while after

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that, both looking down without saying anything. What was there to say? Two little cups of black coffee had arrived by now—just as an excuse for them to stay there.

Finally he raised his head, looked at her, and put words to what he'd been thinking. "You can't go back any more, not even once. You're out of the house and away from it now, so you've got to stay out. You can't go near it again, not even one more time. One more night may be one night too many. He'll kill you one of these nights—he will even if he doesn't mean to. What to him is just a thrill, an excitement, will take away your life. Think about that—you've *got* to think about that."

"I have already," she admitted. "Often."

"You don't want to go to the police?"

"I'm ashamed." She covered her eyes reluctantly with her hand for a moment. "I know I'm not the one who should be, he's the one. But I am nevertheless. I couldn't bear to tell it to an outsider, to put it on record, to file a complaint—it's so intimate. Like taking off all your clothes in public. I can hardly bring myself even to have you know about it. And I haven't told you everything—not everything."

He gave her a shake of the head, as though he knew.

"If I try to hide out in Pittsfield, he'll find me sooner or later—it's not that big a place—and come after me and force me to come back, and either way there'll be a scandal. And I don't want that, I couldn't stand that. The newspapers . . ."

All at once, before they quite knew how it had come about, or even realized that it had come about, they were deep in the final plans, the final strategy and staging that they had been drawing slowly nearer and nearer to all these months. Nearer to with every meeting, with every look and with every word. The plans for her liberation and her salvation.

He took her hands across the table.

"No, listen. This is the way, this is how. New York. It has to be New York: he won't be able to get you back; it's too big; he won't even be able to find you. The company's holding a business conference there on Tuesday, with each of the regional offices sending a representative the way they always do. I was slated to go, long before this came up. I was going to call you on Monday before I left. But what I'm going to do now is to leave ahead of time, tonight, and take you with me."

He raised one of her hands and patted it encouragingly.

"You wait for me here in the restaurant. I have to go back to the office, wind up a few things, then I'll come back and pick you up—shouldn't take me more than half an hour."

She looked around her uneasily.

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"I don't want to sit here alone. They're already giving me knowing looks each time they pass, the waitresses, as if they sense something's wrong."

"Let them, the hell with them," he said shortly, with the defiance of a man in the opening stages of love.

"Can't you call your office from here? Do it over the phone?"

"No, there are some papers that have to be signed—they're waiting for me on my desk."

"Then you run me back to the house and while you're doing what you have to at the office I'll pick up a few things; then you can stop by for me and we'll start out from there."

"Isn't that cutting it a little close?" he said doubtfully. "I don't want you to go back there." He pivoted his wrist watch closer to him. "What time does he usually come home on Fridays?"

"Never before ten at night."

He said the first critical thing he'd ever said to her. "Just like a girl. All for the sake of a hairbrush and a cuddly negligee you're willing to stick your head back into that house."

"It's more than just a hairbrush," she pointed out. "I have some money there. It's not his, it's mine. Even if this friend from my days in Rome—the one I've spoken to you about—even if she takes me in with her at the start, I'll need some money to tide me over until I can get a job and find a place of my own. And there are other things, like my birth certificate, that I may need later on; he'll never give them up willingly once I leave."

"All right," he gave in. "We'll do it your way."

Then just before they got up from the table, that had witnessed such a change in both their lives, they gave each other a last look. A last, and yet a first one. And they understood each other.

She didn't wait for him to say it, to ask it. There is no decorum in desperation, no coyness in a crisis. She knew it had been asked unsaid, anyway. "I want to rediscover the meaning of gentle love. I want to lie in your bed, in your arms. I want to be your wife."

He took hold of her left hand, raised the third finger, stripped off the wedding band and in its place firmly guided downward a massive fraternity ring that had been on his own hand until that very moment. Heavy, ungainly, much too large for her—and yet everything that love should be.

She put it to her lips and kissed it.

They were married, now.

The emptied ring rolled off the table and fell on the floor, and as they moved away his foot stepped on it, not on purpose, and distorted it into something warped, misshapen, no longer round, no longer true. Like what it had stood for.

He drove her back out to the

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house and dropped her off at the door, and they parted almost in silence, so complete was their understanding by now, just three muted words between them: "About thirty minutes."

It was dark now, and broodingly sluggish. Like something supine waiting to spring, with just the tip of its tail twitching. Leaves stood still on the trees. An evil green star glinted in the black sky like a hostile eye, like an evil spying eye.

His car had hummed off; she'd finished and brought down a small packed bag to the ground floor when the phone rang. It would be Garry, naturally, telling her he'd finished at the office and was about to leave.

"Hello—" she began, urgently and vitally and confidentially, the way you share a secret with just one person and this was the one.

Mark's voice was at the other end.

"You sound more chipper than you usually do when I call up to tell you I'm on the way home."

Her expectancy stopped. And everything else with it. She didn't know what to say. "Do I?" And then, "Oh, I see."

"Did you have a good day? You must have had a *very* good day."

She knew what he meant, she knew what he was implying.

"I—I—oh, I did nothing, really. I haven't been out of the house all day."

"That's strange," she heard him say. "I called you earlier—about an hour ago?" It was a question, a pitfall of a question. "You didn't come to the phone."

"I didn't hear it ring," she said hastily, too hastily. "I might have been out front for a few minutes. I remember I went out there to broom the gravel in the drivew—"

Too late she realized he hadn't called at all. But now he knew that she hadn't been in the house all day, that she'd been out somewhere during part of it.

"I'll be a little late." And then something that sounded like "That's what you want to hear, isn't it?"

"What?" she said quickly. "What?"

"I said I'll be a little late."

"What was it you said after that?"

"What was it you said after that?" he quoted studiedly, giving her back her own words.

She knew he wasn't going to repeat it, but by that very token she knew she'd heard it right the first time.

He *knows,* she told herself with a shudder of premonition as she got off the phone and finally away from him. (His voice could hold fast to you and enthrall you too; his very voice could torture you, as well as his wicked, cruel fingers.) He knows there's someone; he may not know who yet, but he knows there is someone.

A remark from one of the night-

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mare nights came back to her: "There's somebody else who wouldn't do this, isn't there? There's somebody else who wouldn't make you cry."

She should have told Garry about it long before this. Because now she had to get away from Mark at all cost, even more than she had had to ever before. Now there would be a terrible vindictiveness, a violent jealousy sparking the horrors where before there had sometimes been just an irrational impulse, sometimes dying as quickly as it was born. Turned aside by a tear or a prayer or a run around a chair.

And then another thing occurred to her, and it frightened her even more immediately, here and now. What assurance was there that he was where he'd said he was, still in the city waiting to start out for here? He might have been much closer, ready to jump out at her unexpectedly, hoping to throw her offguard and catch her away from the house with someone, or (as if she could have possibly been that sort of person) with that someone right here in the very house with her. He'd lied about calling the first time; why wouldn't he lie about where he was?

And now that she thought of it, there was a filling station with a public telephone less than five minutes drive from here, on the main thruway that came up from Boston. An eddy of fear swirled around her, like dust rising off the floor in some barren drafty place. She had to do one of two things immediately—there was no time to do both. Either call Garry at his office and warn him to hurry, that their time limit had shrunk. Or try to trace Mark's call and find out just how much margin of safety was still left to them.

She chose the latter course, which was the mistaken one to choose.

Long before she'd been able to identify the filling station exactly enough for the information operator to get its number, the whole thing had become academic. There was a slither and a shuffle on the gravel outside and a car, someone's car, had come to a stop in front of the house.

Her first impulse, carried out immediately without thinking why, was to snap off all the room lights. Probably so she could see out without being seen from out there.

She sprang over to the window, and then stood there rigidly motionless, leaning a little to peer intently out. The car had stopped at an unlucky angle of perspective—unlucky for her. They had a trellis with tendrils of wisteria twining all over it like bunches of dangling grapes. It blanked out the midsection of the car, its body shape, completely. The beams of the acetylene-bright headlights shone out past one side, but they told her

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nothing; they could have come from any car. The little glimmer of color on the driveway, at the other side, told her no more.

She heard the door crack open and clump closed. Someone's feet, obviously a man's, chopped up the wooden steps to the entrance veranda, and she saw a figure cross it, but it was too dark to make out who he was.

She had turned now to face the other way, and without knowing it her hand was holding the place where her heart was. This was Mark's house, he had the front-door key. Garry would have to ring. She waited to hear the doorbell clarinet out and tell her she was safe, she would be loved, she would live.

Instead there was a double click, back then forth, the knob twined around, and the door opened. A spurt of cool air told her it had opened.

Frightened back into childhood fears, she turned and scurried, like some little girl with pigtails flying out behind her, scurried back along the shadowed hall, around behind the stairs, and into a closet that lay back there, remote as any place in the house could be. She pushed herself as far to the back as she could, and crouched down, pulling hanging things in front of her to screen and to protect her, to make her invisible. Sweaters and mackintoshes and old forgotten coveralls. And she hid her head down between her knees—the way children do when a goblin or an ogre is after them, thinking that if they can't see it, that fact alone will make the terror go away.

The steps went up the stairs, on over her, up past her head. She could feel the shake if not hear the sound. Then she heard her name called out, but the voice was blurred by the many partitions and separations between—as if she were listening to it from underwater. Then the step came down again, and the man stood there at the foot of the stairs, uncertain. She tried to teach herself how to forget to breathe, but she learned badly.

There was a little *tick!* of a sound, and he'd given himself more light. Then each step started to sound clearer than the one before, as the distance to her thinned away. Her heart began to stutter and turn over, and say: Here he comes, here he comes. Light cracked into the closet around three sides of the door, and two arms reached in and started to make swimming motions among the hanging things, trying to find her.

Then they found her, one at each shoulder, and lifted her and drew her outside to him. (With surprising gentleness.) And pressed her to his breast. And her tears made a new pattern of little wet polka dots all over what had been Garry's solid-colored necktie until now.

All she could say was, "Hurry, hurry, get me out of here!"

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"You must have left the door open in your hurry when you came back here. I tried it, found it unlocked, and just walked right in. When I looked back here, I saw that the sleeve of that old smock had got caught in the closet door and was sticking out. Almost like an arm, beckoning me on to show me where you were hiding. It was uncanny. Your guardian angel must love you very much, Linda."

But will he always, she wondered? Will he always?

He took her to the front door, detoured for a moment to pick up the bag, then led her outside and closed the door behind them for good and all.

"Just a minute," she said, and stopped, one foot on the ground, one still on the wooden front steps.

She opened her handbag and took out her key—the key to what had been her home and her marriage. She flung it back at the door, and it hit and fell, with a cheap shabby little *clop!*— like something of not much value.

Once they were in the car they just drove; they didn't say anything more for a long time.

All the old things had been said. All the new things to be said were still to come.

In her mind's eye she could see the sawtoothed towers of New York climbing slowly up above the horizon before her at the end of the long road. Shimmering there, iridescent, opalescent, rainbows of chrome and glass and hope. Like Jerusalem, like Mecca, or some other holy spot. Beckoning, offering heaven. And of all the things New York has meant to various people at various times—fame, success, fulfillment—it probably never meant as much before as it meant to her tonight: a place of refuge, a sanctuary, a place to be safe in.

"How long does the trip take?" she asked him wistful-eyed.

"I usually make it in less than four hours. Tonight I'll make it in less than three."

I'll never stray out of New York, again, she promised hersself. Once I'm safely there, I'll never go out in the country again. I never want to see a tree again, except way down below me in Central Park from a window high up.

"Oh, get me there, Garry, get me there."

"I'll get you there," Garry promised, like any new bridegroom, and bent to kiss the hand she had placed over his on the wheel.

Two car headlights from the opposite direction hissed by them—like parallel tracer bullets going so fast they seemed to swirl around rather than undulate with the road flaws.

She purposely waited a moment, then said in a curiously surreptitious voice, as though it shouldn't be mentioned too loudly, "Did you see that?"

All he answered, noncommittally, was, "Mmm."

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"That was the Italian compact."

"You couldn't tell what it was," he said, trying to distract her from her fear. "Went by too fast."

"I know it too well. I recognized it."

Again she waited a moment, as though afraid to make the movement she was about to. Then she turned and looked back, staring hard and steadily into the funneling darkness behind them.

Two back lights had flattened out into a bar, an ingot. Suddenly this flashed to the other side of the road, then reversed. Then, like a ghastly scimitar chopping down all the tree trunks in sight, the headlights reappeared, rounded out into two spheres, gleaming, small—but coming back after them.

"I told you. It's turned and doubled back."

He was still trying to keep her from panic. "May have nothing to do with us. May not be the same car we saw go by just now."

"It is. Why would he make a complete about-turn like that in the middle of nowhere. There's no intersection or side road back there—we haven't passed one for miles."

She looked again.

"They keep coming. And they already look bigger than when they started back. I think they're gaining on us."

He said, with an unconcern that he didn't feel, "Then we'll have to put a stop to that."

They burst into greater velocity, with a surge like a forward billow of air.

She looked, and she looked again. Finally to keep from turning so constantly, she got up on the seat on the point of one knee and faced backward, her hair pouring forward all around her, jumping with an electricity that was really speed.

"Stay down," he warned. "You're liable to get thrown that way. We're up to 65 now." He gave her a quick tug for additional emphasis, and she subsided into the seat once more.

"How is it now?" he checked presently. The rear-view mirror couldn't reflect that far back.

"They haven't grown smaller, but they haven't grown larger."

"We've stabilized, then," he translated. "Dead heat."

Then after another while and another look, "Wait a minute!" she said suddenly on a note of breath-holding hope. Then, "No," she mourned quickly afterward. "For a minute I thought—but they're back again. It was only a dip in the road."

"They hang on like leeches, can't seem to shake them off," she complained in a fretful voice, as though talking to herself. "Why don't they go away? Why *don't* they?"

Another look, and he could sense the sudden stiffening of her body.

"They're getting bigger. I know I'm not mistaken."

He could see that too. They were finally peering into the rear-view

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mirror for the first time. They'd go offside, then they'd come back in again. In his irritation he took one hand off the wheel long enough to give the mirror a backhand slap that moved it out of focus altogether.

"Suppose I stop, get out and face him when he comes up, and we have it out here and now. What can he do? I'm younger, I can outslug him."

Her refusal to consent was an outright scream of protest. All her fears and all her aversion were in it.

"All right," he said. "Then we'll run him into the ground if we have to."

She covered her face with both hands—not at the speed they were making, but at the futility of it.

"They sure build good cars in Torino, damn them to hell!" he swore in angry frustration.

She uncovered and looked. The headlights were closer than before. She began to lose control of herself.

"Oh, this is like every nightmare I ever had when I was a little girl! When something was chasing me, and I couldn't get away from it. Only now there'll be no waking up in the nick of time."

"Stop that," he shouted at her. "Stop it. It only makes it worse, it doesn't help."

"I think I can feel his breath blowing down the back of my neck."

He looked at her briefly, but she could tell by the look on his face he hadn't been able to make out what she'd said.

Streaks of wet that were not tears were coursing down his face in uneven lengths. "My necktie," he called out to her suddenly, and raised his chin to show her what he meant. She reached over, careful not to place herself in front of him, and pulled the knot down until it was loose. Then she freed the buttonhole from the top button of his shirt.

A long curve in the road cut them off for a while, from those eyes, those unrelenting eyes behind them. Then the curve ended, and the eyes came back again. It was worse somehow, after they'd been gone like that, than when they remained steadily in sight the whole time.

"He holds on and holds on and *holds on*—like a mad dog with his teeth locked into you."

"He's a mad dog all right." All pretense of composure had long since left him. He was lividly angry at not being able to win the race, to shake the pursuer off. She was mortally frightened. The long-sustained tension of the speed duel, which seemed to have been going on for hours, compounded her fears, raised them at last to the pitch of hysteria.

Their car swerved erratically, the two outer wheels jogged briefly over marginal stones and roots that

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felt as if they were as big as boulders and logs. He flung his chest forward across the wheel as if it were something alive that he was desperately trying to hold down; then the car recovered, came back to the road, straightened out safely again with a catarrhal shudder of its rear axle.

"Don't," he warned her tautly in the short-lived lull before they picked up hissing momentum again. "Don't grab me like that again. It went right through the shoulder of my jacket. I can't manage the car, can't hold it, if you do that. I'll get you away. Don't worry, I'll get you away from him."

She threw her head back in despair, looking straight up overhead. "We seem to be standing still. The road has petrified. The trees aren't moving backwards any more. The stars don't either. Neither do the rocks along the side. Oh, faster, Garry, faster!"

"You're hallucinated. Your senses are being tricked by fear.

"Faster, Garry, faster!"

"85, 86. We're on two wheels most of the time—two are off the ground. I can't even breathe, my breath's being pulled out of me."

She started to beat her two clenched fists against her forehead in a tattoo of hypnotic inability to escape. "I don't care, Garry! Faster, faster! If I've got to die, let it be with you, not with him!"

"I'll get you away from him. If it kills me."

That was the last thing he said.

If it kills me.

And as though it had overheard, and snatched at the collateral offered it, that unpropitious sickly greenish star up there—surely Mark's star not theirs—at that very moment a huge tremendous thing came into view around a turn in the road. A skyscraper of a long-haul van, its multiple tiers beaded with red warning lights. But what good were they that high up, except to warn off planes?

It couldn't maneuver. It would have required a turntable. And they had no time or room.

There was a soft crunchy sound, like someone shearing the top off a soft-boiled egg with a knife. At just one quick slice. Then a brief straight-into-the-face blizzard effect, but with tiny particles of glass instead of frozen flakes. Just a one-gust blizzard—and then over with. Then an immense whirl of light started to spin, like a huge Ferris wheel all lit up and going around and around, with parabolas of light streaking off in every direction and dimming. Like shooting stars, or the tails of comets.

Then the whole thing died down and went out, like a blazing amusement park sinking to earth. Or the spouts of illuminated fountains settling back into their basins . . .

She could tell the side of her face was resting against the ground, because blades of grass were brushing against it with a feathery tick-

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ling feeling. And some inquisitive little insect kept flitting about just inside the rim of her ear. She tried to raise her hand to brush it away, but then forgot where it was and what it was.

But then forgot . . .

When they picked her up at last, more out of this world than in it, all her senses gone except for reflex-actions, her lips were still quivering with the unspoken sounds of "Faster, Garry, faster! Take me away—"

Then the long nights, that were also days, in the hospital. And the long blanks, that were also nights. Needles, and angled glass rods to suck water through. Needles, and curious enamel wedges slid under your middle. Needles, and—needles and needles and needles. Like swarms of persistent mosquitoes with unbreakable drills. The way a pincushion feels, if it could feel. Or the target of a porcupine. Or a case of not just momentary but permanently endured static electricity after you scuff across a woolen rug and then put your finger on a light switch. Even food was a needle—a jab into a vein . . .

Then at last her head cleared, her eyes cleared, her mind and voice came back from where they'd been. Each day she became a little stronger, and each day became a little longer. Until they were back for good, good as ever before. Life came back into her lungs and heart. She could feel it there, the swift current of it. Moving again, eager again. Sun again, sky again, rain and pain and love and hope again. Life again—the beautiful thing called life.

Each day they propped her up in a chair for a little while. Close beside the bed, but each day for a little while longer.

Then at last she asked, after many starts that she could never finish, "Why doesn't Garry come to me? Doesn't he know I've been hurt?"

"Garry can't come to you," the nurse answered. And then, in the way that you whip off a bandage that has adhered to a wound, fast, in order to make the pain that much shorter than it would be if you lingeringly edged it off a little at a time, then the nurse quickly told her, "Garry won't come to you any more."

The black tears, so many of them, such a rain of them, blotted out the light and brought on the darkness . . .

Then the light was back again, and no more tears. Just—Garry won't come to you any more.

Now the silent words were: Not so fast, Garry, not so fast; you've left me behind and I've lost my way.

Then in a little while she asked the nurse, "Why don't you ever let me get up from this chair? I'm better now, I eat well, the strength has come back to my arms, my hands,

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my fingers, my whole body feels strong. Shouldn't I be allowed to move around and exercise a little? To stand up and take a few steps?"

"The doctor will tell you about that," the nurse said evasively.

The doctor came in later and he told her about it. Bluntly, in the modern way, without subterfuges and without false hopes. The kind, the sensible, the straight-from-the-shoulder modern way.

"Now listen to me. The world is a beautiful world, and life is a beautiful life. In this beautiful world everything is comparative; luck is comparative. You could have come out of it stone-blind from the shattered glass, with both your eyes gone. You could have come out of it minus an arm, crushed and having to be taken off. You could have come out of it with your face hideously scarred, wearing a repulsive mask for the rest of your life that would make people sicken and turn away. You could have come out of it dead, as—as someone else did. Who is to say you are lucky, who is to say you are not? You have come out of it beautiful of face. You have come out of it keen and sensitive of mind, a mind with all the precision and delicate adjustment of the works inside a fine Swiss watch. A mind that not only *thinks*, but *feels*. You have come out of it with a strong brave youthful heart that will carry you through for half a century yet, come what may.

"But—"

She looked at him with eyes that didn't fear.

"You will never again take a single step for all the rest of your life. You are hopelessly, irreparably paralyzed from the waist down. Surgery, everything, has been tried. Accept this . . . Now you know—and so now be brave."

"I am. I will be," she said trustfully. "I'll learn a craft of some kind, that will occupy my days and earn me a living. Perhaps you can find a nursing home for me at the start until I get adjusted, and then maybe later I can find a little place all to myself and manage there on my own. There are such places, with ramps instead of stairs—"

He smiled deprecatingly at her oversight.

"All that won't be necessary. You're forgetting. There *is* someone who will look after you. Look after you well. You'll be in good capable hands. Your husband is coming to take you home with him today."

Her scream was like the death cry of a wounded animal. So strident, so unbelievable, that in the stillness of its aftermath could be heard the slithering and rustling of people looking out the other ward-room doors along the corridor, nurses and ambulatory patients, asking one another what that terrified cry had been and where it had come from.

"Two cc's of M, and hurry" the

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doctor instructed the nurse tautly. "It's just the reaction from what she's been through. This sometimes happens—going-home happiness becomes hysteria."

The wet kiss of alcohol on her arm. Then the needle again—the needle meant to be kind.

One of them patted her on the head and said, "You'll be all right now."

A tear came to the corner of her eyes, and just lay there, unable to retreat, unable to fall . . .

Myopically she watched them dress her and put her in her chair. Her mind remained awake, but everything was downgraded in intensity—the will to struggle had become reluctance, fear had become unease. She still knew there was cause to scream, but the distance had become too great, the message had too far to travel.

Through lazy, contracting pupils she looked over and saw Mark standing in the doorway, talking to the doctor, shaking the nurse's hand and leaving something behind in it for which she smiled her thanks. Then he went around in back of her wheel chair, with a phantom breath for a kiss to the top of her head, and started to sidle it toward the door that was being held open for the two of them. He tipped the front of the chair ever so slightly, careful to avoid the least jar or impact or roughness, as if determined that she reach her destination with him in impeccable condition, unmarked and unmarred.

And as she craned her neck and looked up overhead, and then around and into his face, backward, the unspoken message was so plain, in his shining eyes and in the grim grin he showed his teeth in, that though he didn't say it aloud, there was no need to; it reached from his mind into hers without sound or the need of sound just as surely as though he had said it aloud.

Now I've got you.

Now he had her—for the rest of her life.

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THE SCRAP OF KNOWLEDGE

by FLETCHER FLORA

OLD MEN DIE OF MANY ILLS. THE years bring to them an increasing vulnerability to affliction. Arteries harden, hearts fail, kidneys and livers wear out. If you let an old man alone, he will certainly die in his own way and in own time and without help or hindrance. It seems, therefore, a kind of conspicuous waste, an unnecessary expenditure of effort, if the time is chosen for him and the way is selected by someone else. Of course, when you come right down to it, all deaths are caused by heart failure. The significant thing, from a post-mortem point of view, is what caused the heart to fail. Here again, the causes are various, and sometimes obscure.

But not in this case. In this case, the cause was perfectly apparent. It could be seen with the naked eye and examined without autopsy. Now removed, the cause had pro-

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truded from between the shoulders at a sharp upward angle, and the old man's thin blood had seeped out around it in an anemic stain.

Dying from a stab in the back is comparatively swift and simple if the wound is in the right spot. Nevertheless it imposes problems. It develops post-mortem complications. It becomes necessary, that is, for some luckless devil to discover, if possible, who chose the time and the way, and for what reason.

Just my luck, thought Lieutenant Joseph Marcus, to be the one who has to discover the time, method, and motive.

The dead man's name was Myron Fischer. He sat folded over his desk with his head and left arm at rest on the surface and his right arm hanging at his side. His head was turned, exposing a hawkish profile, as if he had, in dying, tried to find a comfortable position for it. Off-white scalp showed between wisps of off-white hair, and in the hair were flakes of dandruff. Not that this was important. In death, dandruff is not a contributory factor.

What was important, or might turn out to be, was the sheet of plain paper, 8½ x 11, which was lying under the old man's left hand. Near the hand, where it had rolled after being released, was a ballpoint pen. Myron Fischer's last act, apparently, had been to try to write something on the sheet of paper with the pen. The old man, thought Marcus, was a southpaw—left-handed. Not, he thought, that this was important, either.

What the murdered man had tried to write was important—or might turn out to be. Deftly, Marcus slipped the paper from under the dead weight of the hand. On it in ink was a brief scrawl, truncated by death. The scrawl, as expected, was spidery and erratic, barely legible. The handwriting of old men deteriorates. That of dying men deteriorates even more. Nevertheless, Marcus got the message. Or thought he did.

Myron Fischer had written what appeared to be an antic *M* followed by an expiring *y*. The *y* was crowded against the last leg of the *M*. And that was all. And being all, what the hell did it mean? Had the old man, with a fatal dagger in his back, made an agonized effort in his last moments to write his own name?

Marcus pushed the sheet aside with the tip of an index finger. His eyes drifted over the desk. Thin stack of paper from which the dying-message sheet had come. Besides the paper and pen, nothing whatever except the current issue of a nationally distributed journal of astrology. Had the old man in his senility been converted to the zodiac? And what, Marcus wondered, had the stars foretold for him today? Danger? Proceed with caution? Beware of murderers bearing daggers?

Marcus turned away and looked

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around the room. Shelved books on all the walls. Heavy, worn furniture, the chairs upholstered in dark brown leather. A library trying to look like a library. Near the door to the hall Sergeant Bobo Fuller, trying to look like a detective. Which was what he was and what he looked like.

"It's enough," said Lieutenant Marcus, "to make a man resign from the force."

This was a possibility which Fuller looked upon with favor. His vague and irrational animus toward his superior was relieved periodically by the dream of shameful croppers, of dismissal or demotion, and even, in moments of bitter frustration, of sudden death. Marcus, aware of the animus, simply tolerated it. He was, in fact, fond of Sergeant Fuller. Moreover, he suspected that Fuller would miss him if he were gone, as he would miss his mother-in-law or the recurrence of his rheumatism when it rained.

"What is?" Fuller asked.

"This is." Marcus made a broad gesture that incorporated the corpse, the desk, the total scene. "All this hocus-pocus."

"Murder's always hocus-pocus. What's so different about this one?"

"It's like a tired thriller. Like a mystery novel. The same mixture as before. Consider the circumstances, Fuller: here's a rich old man stabbed in the back as he sat at his desk. Just before he died he tried to write something which must, I suppose, be taken as a clue to the identity of his killer. And where was he sitting when he was stabbed? In the library, of course! In the very best thriller tradition, Fuller. All that's lacking is a butler to turn up guilty as sin. By the way, is there a butler, Fuller?"

"There's a butler."

"I might have known. I wish I were Ellery Queen or Hercule Poirot or someone like that. But I'm just a plain cop, damn it. I'm not cut out for these fancy cases."

"What did he try to write?"

"It looks like a crude *M* and *y*. Here, see for yourself."

Invited, Fuller approached and looked. He grunted.

"His name was Myron," he said. "Maybe he started to write his own name."

"I thought of that. But why his own name? Why not the name of his murderer?"

Fuller tilted his head back and stared at the juncture of ceiling and wall above a high, narrow window. His embittered heart was humming a little paean of minor triumph. For, as it happened, Fuller knew something that Marcus, as yet, didn't. It was true the knowledge was only a small matter that had come to him through no virtue or effort of his own. Nevertheless, it was germane to the issue; it contributed.

"His older son is also named Myron," Fuller said.

"Well," said Marcus, "well." He sensed Fuller's satisfaction and was

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inclined to feed it. "That's interesting, Fuller. Maybe we won't be needing any fancy story-book sleuth, after all."

Fuller was tempted to comment on the good fortune of maybe not needing what they clearly didn't have; but he managed, with an effort, to put that particular devil behind him. Marcus sat down in a high-backed chair, leaned his head against the leather padding, and closed his eyes. He had come late to this case. The preliminary routine had been completed, and all the technicians were gone. The police ambulance was expected, and should have, in fact, been here before. Initial inquiries had been made, the inhabitants of the house questioned, and Fuller, who had done the questioning, had in his pocket a notebook full of notes. He was probably eager to read them, and Marcus was ready to listen. He said so. Prompted, Fuller dug out the notebook.

"Everyone who was in the house, except the servants," he said, "is waiting in the living room."

"Good. We'll let them wait a little longer. Fill me in, Fuller."

Fuller did. Fuller was, in fact, good at reports. He had a nice sense of discrimination. In the routine of a case he could separate what was important from what wasn't. His rhetoric was lean, his details culled. The murder, according to the medical examiner, had been committed at approximately ten o'clock that morning. The body had been discovered by the butler, name of Samson, at approximately ten thirty. In the house at the time, in addition to the butler, the cook, and two maids, were Mr. Myron Fischer, the older son; Mr. Julian Fischer, the younger son; Judith Fischer, spouse to Myron; Sandra Fischer, spouse to Julian; Agnes Fischer, the unmarried daughter; and Mr. Ambrose Dillon, family lawyer, friend, and overnight guest.

Fuller's thumbnail characterizations were just that: Myron Junior was something of a prude; Julian was apparently something of a drunk, inasmuch as he had, at eleven in the morning, already started drinking his lunch; Judith was reserved and charming; Sandra was unreserved and sexy; Agnes, withering on the stalk, was definitely spinsterish.

At ten, the approximate time of the murder, Myron Junior was walking, after a solitary breakfast, in the garden behind the house. Judith, still abed, was writing letters. Julian, likewise, was probably recovering from the night before. Sandra, also still abed, was simply a chronic late riser. Agnes, although up and dressed, had not left her room. Ambrose Dillon, descending at nine thirty, had taken coffee and the morning paper to the terrace on the side of the house opposite the library.

The cook was in the kitchen, the butler was here or there, the

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maids were about their duties in this room or that—or so, at least, they all said. The windows to the library were locked on the inside. The door from the library to the hall was not.

Who then could have murdered Myron Fischer? Well, from the point of view of opportunity you could just about pay your money and take your choice. And how about motive? Well, old Myron had been many times a millionaire. You could probably find a motive in that if you scratched around in it long enough.

"In that case, I'd better go scratch." Lieutenant Marcus sighed, opened his eyes, and stood up. "They're all in the living room, you say?"

"Yes."

"Is there another room handy where we can have some privacy?"

"There's a small den directly off one end of the living room. You can enter it either from the living room or the hall."

"I'll go in from the hall. Lock this room and come along, Fuller. You can sit with the suspects and send them in one at a time. We've got to play this cozy, like Scotland Yard in the books. I don't often get a chance to make like a real highbrow detective."

Myron Fischer Junior (though technically no longer Junior) sat in a straight chair with his feet planted together on the floor and his hands cupping his knees. He was facing a window that leaked light between heavy brocade drapes, and Marcus could see in the light that Myron's face was an orderly arrangement of pleasant features on good bones, everything in its proper place and in good repair. He just missed being handsome, and Marcus wondered why he missed. He decided that it was because of the pinched effect at the corners of a mouth that was too thin and sober. Careful type, Marcus thought, reserved. Caution encroaching on suspicion. He was a reasonable number of feet tall, six-ish, and reasonably young as young goes, fortyish. He was wearing a neat gray suit from an expensive bolt of material that had been cut and put together by an excellent tailor. His shirt was white, his tie was blue.

"You have suffered a tragic loss, Mr. Fischer," Marcus said. "I'm sorry."

Myron Fischer looked into the light. His lids were lowered, his face was carefully composed.

"It's incredible," he said. "Utterly incredible."

"Do you have any idea who murdered your father?"

"None whatever."

"Anyone who *wanted* to murder him?"

"No." Myron shook his head with a kind of restrained violence, as if he were trying to clear it of unaccustomed fantasies. "He was an old man. To my knowledge he had no enemies—none at all."

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"He must have had one—unless you think he was killed by a friend or a casual acquaintance. Your given name, I believe, is the same as your father's?"

"It is—Myron. I'm the older son."

"Was your relationship with your father amicable?"

"Certainly. We had some minor differences of opinion, but nothing of consequence."

"I understand he was a wealthy man. Is that so?"

"It is."

"What are the dispositions of his will? Do you know?"

"I do not. I assume the bulk of his fortune will come to me and Julian and Agnes—we are his only children. Ambrose Dillon will know the terms of his will. He could answer your question."

"I'll ask him. I've been told that you were walking in the garden at ten o'clock this morning. For the record, is that true?"

"Yes. I'd had breakfast alone. I walked out immediately afterward."

"Your wife, therefore, was alone in your room?"

"She had a number of letters to write. She usually takes care of her correspondence before coming down."

"Was she awake when you left her?"

"Yes. She was sitting up against the headboard of the bed with her writing case in her lap." Myron halted abruptly, his air of suspicion becoming suddenly sharper. "Why? You seem to be trying to get at something."

"Not at all. I'm merely asking the necessary questions, as you must know. You're a realistic man, I believe, Mr. Fischer. Surely you recognize that your father was probably killed by someone in this house."

"That's absurd!"

"Is it? Who do you suggest?"

"No one. No one specifically, I mean. Someone who entered the house from outside."

"Did your father have an appointment?"

"Not to my knowledge. But he may have."

"If so, he must have admitted his caller himself. The windows to the library were closed and locked on the inside. The servants admitted no one by the doors. Was it your father's practice to answer the door himself?"

"It wasn't his practice, no. But in this particular instance he may have made an exception."

"The weapon with which he was stabbed. Did you examine it?"

"I saw it."

"Did you recognize it?"

"Yes. It was a heavy, dagger-type letter opener that was usually left on top of his desk."

"Anyone, then, could have picked it up and used it?"

"Yes, certainly. If it was lying in plain sight, that is."

"It's suggestive. It suggests in the

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first place that the murder was an act of compulsion. Unpremeditated. A murderer who planned a murder would assure himself of a weapon in advance. In the second place, it suggests a relationship of familiarity, perhaps of trust. It is doubtful, I should think, that your father would have permitted a threatening or dangerous person to come up behind him. If, that is, he knew the person was in the room."

"In other words, you are saying again that the murderer was a member of this household. I can't believe that. You simply must be mistaken."

"Am I? I hope so." Lieutenant Marcus took from his pocket the sheet of paper he had removed earlier from under the hand of the corpse. "By the way, when you first saw your father's body, did you happen to notice this paper on his desk?"

"I may have noticed it. I don't really remember. I was shocked and incredulous, of course. In such a state one is not aware of—of details."

"Naturally."

"May I ask what it says?"

"Perhaps you'd like to examine it now."

Marcus extended the sheet, and Myron Fischer held it between the tips of his fingers and stared at it for a long while, his face closed. Then he returned it to Marcus.

"I see. You think my father was trying to write the name of his murderer when he died. My name."

"Are you his murderer, Mr. Fischer?"

"I am not."

"Why did you assume immediately that it was your name he started to write?"

"The writing is very crude, but it is clearly a capital *M,* followed by a small *y*. Those are the first two letters of my Christian name."

"So they are. They are also a possessive pronoun. And there are other possibilities too."

"You would do well to explore those other possibilities."

"Thank you for your advice. Thanks also for your cooperation. I wonder, when you go out, if you would ask your brother to step in here?"

"Certainly. Provided, I mean, he is still competent. My brother, Lieutenant, is addicted to the bottle."

Although the words were spoken without special inflection, the thin lips from which they came had acquired a sudden ugly twist, as if something were bitter on the tongue behind them. Turning away, Myron Fischer walked out of the room. Marcus sighed and leaned back and waited, and after a few moments Julian Fischer came in and sat down. He crossed his knees and nodded his head and looked at Marcus with brown and friendly eyes. He was not as handsome as his older brother, but he was, altogether, more attractive. His hair was brown and brushed. His face showed signs of early erosion from

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alcohol and late hours, but it managed to retain, somehow, a kind of open and vulnerable innocence. One had the feeling that he would, if he had one, wag his tail. Marcus wanted to pat his head and call him Bowser.

He was already quite drunk, that was plain, but he greeted Marcus softly and in good humor, and his diction had the careful and impeccable quality of conscious effort that is characteristic of the well-mannered souse who sustains a proper concern for the sensibilities of the sober. Somewhere along the way, sometime between one drink and the next, he would quietly fold up and pass out. He would not get sloppy. He would not get offensive. He would not get belligerent. He carried his liquor well. He was what is known as "a pleasant drunk."

"I wonder," said Marcus, "if you could answer a few questions?"

"My pleasure, Lieutenant. Fire away. You will find me mellow but, I assure you, lucid."

"My sympathy, first, for the loss of your father."

"Ah! Well, I am, fortunately, chronically in a condition appropriate to a wake. My father, Lieutenant, was a noble man. Generous to a fault and filled with a warm tolerance for human frailty. Unlike me, he was not under the influence of the sauce *all* the time. He was under the influence only *half* the time. Brother Myron, bless his soul, is the black sheep of the family. He is constantly sober. He shows the egregious faults of those who have never known euphoria. He tends to be pretentious and intolerant and to make issues of things that don't really matter. Self-righteous is what he is. It will be a tribute to my father's familial devotion if Brother Myron is not cut off without a penny."

"I assume that you and Brother Myron are not on the best of terms."

"On my part, we are on terms of amiable indifference. On his part, unfortunately, the terms are considerably less cordial. Well, I must take a lesson from Father's tolerant example. Myron is a good soul, God damn him. I bear him no ill will."

"That's commendable, I'm sure. Are you informed as to the circumstances of your father's death?"

"He was stabbed in the back, I understand, about ten o'clock."

Julian's brown Bowser eyes were suddenly shocked and grieved as he glimpsed for a moment, out of his euphoria, the irrational atrocities and cruelties of sobriety. He echoed the substance of Marcus' earlier thoughts. "It seems such a damn shame. Useless, you know. The old man would have died before long in any event."

"Someone was in a hurry. Do you have any notion who?"

Julian hesitated for the barest moment. Marcus would have sworn in that moment a name had flashed from his brain and was lying mute on his tongue.

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"No. None at all."

"Where were you at ten o'clock? It's necessary to ask such questions, you understand."

"Oh, quite. Everyone's a suspect. I'm afraid I must disappoint you, however. I was sleeping the sluggish sleep of the transgressor. In brief, as is frequently the case, I was hungover."

"You can prove this?"

"I can't, as a matter of fact."

"Where was your wife?"

"Sandy? Abed beside me. However, that's no help. Sandy's a devoted little devil and would lie herself into hell to help me. But her days don't begin until eleven at the earliest. She wouldn't have the foggiest idea whether I was there or not."

"Unfortunately, that cuts two ways. She can't alibi you and you can't alibi her."

"Sandy a suspect?" Julian seemed genuinely amused rather than alarmed. "Excuse me for laughing, Lieutenant. She loves cats, dogs, all strays, old men, and bedtime entertainment. The last, of course, not with cats, dogs, strays, or old men. She's a bleeder and a giver. A do-gooder. Why, she wouldn't hurt a flea! Besides, she and the old man had an affinity going. I think she made him remember his wanton youth."

"Can you think of any reason why your father should have written the letters *M* and *y* just as he was dying?"

"Did he do that? How tricky of the old man! Leaving an esoteric clue to confound the gendarmes."

"Do you think it was a clue?"

"Why else would he write it? Personally, I can't quite imagine writing anything at all at such a time."

"What does it suggest to you? The *M* and the *y*, I mean."

"His name was Myron. Big Brother's name is Myron. The angels could have snatched him at the end of the first syllable. Is that what you want me to say?"

"I want you to say whatever you think."

"What I really think is a bit rude, I'm afraid."

"Be rude."

"As you wish. I think you're trying to be a cutie. You're 'way off the deep end. No one in this house had any reason whatever to murder the old man. Sorry, Lieutenant. You'd better look somewhere else for a culprit."

"Maybe so. If so, there'll be plenty of time. Meanwhile, I'd like to talk with your sister. I wonder if you'd be kind enough to tell her."

"Kind and accommodating, that's me." He stood up, swayed slightly from the effect of the abrupt movement, and stood still for a moment while his vision cleared and he regained his equilibrium. "Dear old Agnes coming up."

He walked a phantom chalk line out of the room.

Agnes Fischer was a woman with angles where curves should be.

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She kept coming to points in unfortunate places. In the one strategic area in which points are an embellishment, she crossed you up and came to nothing. Flat as the highway from Dodge City to Colby, Kansas. Her arms were thin, her legs were thin, her hips were missing. She was like a sack of instant mashed potatoes. All the juices were out of her.

Otherwise, she wasn't bad. Her thin face was attractive in a pallid and enervated sort of way. Her eyes were the best of her. They were large and dark and shot with feverish lights. Marcus found out later that she was forty, but she looked fifty. At sixty or seventy, she'd still look fifty. Instant mashed potatoes keep indefinitely.

"You wanted to see me, I believe," she said. "I'm Agnes Fischer."

Her voice gave Marcus the irrational notion that it was the antithesis of itself. It was composed of extremes that were, or ought to be, mutually exclusive. It was impossible, it couldn't be, but it was. Listless intensity? Fierce apathy?

"It's good of you to see me, Miss Fischer," Marcus said. "I'm Lieutenant Marcus."

"Your deference is charming, Lieutenant, but hardly convincing. We are both aware, I think, that I have no choice in the matter."

"Yes. Well." Marcus, nonplussed, recovered quickly. "At least allow me to offer my sympathy."

"Thank you."

"Do you feel up to answering a few questions about the circumstances of your father's death?"

"That's what I'm here for. I'm not the emotional type, Lieutenant. At any rate, I have learned to control myself."

"Good. Frankly, I'm relieved. As you've been informed, your father was murdered at about ten o'clock this morning."

"Yes. His body was discovered by Samson in the library."

"Where were you at ten o'clock?"

"In my room. I had dressed but hadn't yet come downstairs. As a matter of fact, I was reading."

"What did you do when you received the news that your father was dead?"

"I came downstairs, of course."

"Did you go into the library?"

"I did not. Myron thought I shouldn't, and I could see no purpose in it."

"Then you didn't see this." Marcus held out the sheet of paper. "Does it mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?"

"I don't know. Your father scrawled those two letters as he was dying—at least, they appear to be letters. What do you make of them?"

"They seem to be the word *My*. A capital *M* and a small *y*."

"Also the first syllable of your brother's name."

"Myron? Are you implying that Father might have been trying to accuse Myron?" The feverish lights

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glittered in her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Are you certain that it's ridiculous?"

"Of course, it is. Why on earth would Myron want to kill Father. Besides, how can you be positive that the letters were written by Father *after* he was stabbed? Perhaps he was in the act of writing *when* he was stabbed."

Marcus, staring at her, revised his original snap judgment sharply upward.

"A neat point, Miss Fischer. Shrewd. One, however, that has occurred to me. For the present, as a working premise, I prefer to ignore it. Were your father's relationships with the members of his family good?"

"Reasonably good. There was no more conflict, I should say, than you would find in any normal family living under the same roof."

"What was your personal feeling for him?"

"I was devoted to him, of course, and I respected him."

"Your brother Julian said he was a noble man."

"No doubt Julian was drunk. Julian is always drunk."

"You disagree with his evaluation?"

"Let's us say it's an exaggeration. Father had his virtues. Also his faults. Especially from a woman's point of view. He was, I mean, a man's man. He was always partial to his sons. He allowed them excessive freedom at times, and he was prone to excuse their vices. Especially Julian's, which are abundant. I think he even found them rather amusing. With the women in the family, however, he set a different standard. With me and my sisters-in-law. He demanded attention. He expected submission. He usually got both. Except, perhaps, from Sandra. She is sometimes difficult. Sandra is inclined toward independence. Even defiance."

"Is that so? I got the impression from Julian that his father was particularly fond of Sandra."

"Fond? Well, perhaps. Deluded, I think, is nearer the truth, but never mind. Old men are vulnerable. Their attachments are unpredictable."

"Did your father have enemies?"

"He was a very rich man. I suppose he made enemies in becoming one. One can't accumulate a fortune without inciting animosity."

"Do you think one of these supposed enemies killed him?"

"It seems apparent."

"Why?"

"Because the only alternative is untenable."

"A member of the household?"

"Yes."

"If it was an outsider, how do you think he gained admittance to the house?"

"Perhaps Father admitted him. Perhaps, one way or another, he admitted himself. You're the detective. That's for you to find out."

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"Right. I am, and it is. I appreciate your candor, Miss Fischer. Now I would like to talk briefly with Judith Fischer or Sandra Fischer."

"Which?"

"Let seniority be our protocol. Judith first."

"Very well, I'll tell her. Then I would like to go to my room and lie down, if you don't mind. I feel another migraine coming on."

She stood up carefully, as if she were afraid any abrupt movement might make her head burst, and walked stiffly to the door.

Quite the contrary was Judith Fischer, who entered in a few moments. She walked with practiced grace, and Marcus wondered if she had been, before her marriage, a high-fashion model. She was, he estimated, about five-five, not counting heels, and she was wearing on that section of the five-five between knees and neck a plain beige sheath. Her arms were fine, her legs superior, her hips were noticeably there. She made her points nicely without excessive emphasis. Her hair had the color and sheen of polished mahagony, and she wore it almost to her shoulders, heavy to the left from a low part on the right. The blood in Agnes Fischer had gone stale. In Judith it was obviously still fizzing. But it didn't follow, because it fizzed, that it boiled. Marcus had the feeling that it ran cold.

Approaching, she held out a hand which Marcus, who had risen, touched. They sat down.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mrs. Fischer," Marcus said. "I'm sorry I must trouble you at such a time."

"Not at all. I'd be glad to help you if I could, but I'm afraid I can't."

Her voice was fastidious with a faint overtone of aversion. It implied that this whole affair was distasteful, and the invaders of her privacy, including Marcus, were scarcely tolerable. He remembered that he had neglected to shine his shoes. He remembered that his shirt had a frayed cuff. He wondered nervously if his fingernails were clean.

"We'll see," he said. "I can ask you questions, if you like, but perhaps you'd prefer just to tell me about the events of this morning as you know them."

"I know very little. I've already made a statement to the other policeman."

"I'd appreciate it if you would repeat it to me."

"Very well. I awoke at about nine o'clock. I talked for a while with my husband, who was awake and dressed. At my request he handed me my writing case, and then he came downstairs to breakfast. I remained in bed, catching up with my correspondence. There were a number of letters to write, and I wrote steadily, except for a few minutes out for coffee, which was brought to me by one of the maids. I did not watch the time, but it was, I understand, about ten thirty when Samson discovered my father-in-

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law's body in the library. There was quite a disturbance, and I got up and put on a robe and came down to see what it was about. I did not go into the library. Later, before the police arrived, I went back upstairs and dressed and remained in my room until I was asked to come down."

"No doubt the letters you wrote are still in your room?"

"They are. They are lying on the bedside table."

"Your husband, I have been told, was walking in the garden when the body was discovered."

"So he was. Samson called him in from there. Are you trying to establish alibis, Lieutenant?"

"Mrs. Fischer, there are no alibis. Everyone in the house, at the critical time, claims to have been alone or sleeping. Anyone could have gone into the library and come out again."

"Without being seen?"

"Someone did."

"Quite true. But not a member of the family. Such an idea is unthinkable."

Marcus, who had not found it so, inasmuch as he had thought it and was still thinking it, did not bother to point out her fallacy. Instead, he showed her the sheet of paper. She studied it briefly and returned it.

"What does it mean?" she said.

"I thought perhaps you might have some idea."

"No. Where did you get it?"

"It was lying under the hand of the murdered man. It seems he was trying to leave a message when he died."

"Isn't that rather far-fetched?"

"Possibly. What do you make of it?"

"Nothing. It seems quite indecipherable."

"You think so? It seems to me to be a capital *M* followed by a small *y*."

"If that's so, it's extremely crude. The *y* is jammed right up against the *M*. In fact, it seemed to me that part of the last leg of the *M* would have to serve as half of the fork of the *y*. Let me see again. Yes, it's so. And the tail of the *y* crosses over the leg lower down. I think you are mistaken, Lieutenant."

"It's crude, certainly. One can't expect a dying man to write clearly. I thought he might have started to write the name Myron."

"If you suspect that my husband had anything to do with the death, the murder, of his own father, you are *surely* mistaken."

A pair of scarlet stains on her cheeks was her only sign of anger. Possibly the anger was a little stronger in her voice. Marcus did not press his point.

"I don't really suspect anyone," he said. "Or no one, let us say, to the exclusion of others. I won't detain you any longer, Mrs. Fischer. Please ask the other Mrs. Fischer to come in."

The other Mrs. Fischer came in

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and suddenly the room seemed to be a place of imminent and erratic possibilities. Even probabilities. Marcus did not know, of course, how many offspring had been spawned by the parents of this one, but however many there had been, Sandra was surely the runt of the litter. By standing straight and stretching joints, she might have reached five feet. By jumping up and down on the scale, she might have registered ninety-five pounds.

But that was not to say by any means that quality was as meager as quantity. Every inch of her sixty made the most of itself. Every pound of her ninety-five worked overtime. Her short corn-colored hair had a slightly tousled look, as if it had just come off a pillow. Her wide gray eyes were the eyes of a wicked innocent. Her wide pink mouth seemed constantly about to do something in the next instant—to yawn or smile or laugh or shape a kiss. She was no beauty, but she was better. She was an artless mantrap. From stem to stern she was highly combustible stuff. Marcus, who was not immune, was acutely aware of it.

Sitting, crossing her knees with fetching indifference to a short skirt, she cocked her head and looked at Marcus brightly.

"If you think it was Julian," she said, "it wasn't."

"Julian? Why should I think it was Julian?"

"You shouldn't. I just said so."

"So you did. Why did you think I might?"

"Because the others would rather it would be Julian than anyone else. They don't approve of him because he drinks so much. He's a kind of family disgrace, like an idiot child. But the old man didn't kick up too rough about it. He and Julian had a kind of understanding or something. I think the old man was a pretty good rounder himself in his day. To tell the truth, there was a little of it left. He used to pat my backside now and then."

Marcus understood. He felt a certain sympathy.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "everyone contends that it was an outsider—someone who was admitted by the victim himself before the murder."

"Really? That's all right, then. I won't have them trying to make a goat out of old Julian."

"Would they do that, do you think?"

"I wouldn't put it past them, if it came to a choice of him or one of them. I mean, they wouldn't consider him any great loss. Old Julian's a regular sponge, you see. He just keeps soaking it up. I suppose it will eventually give him cirrhosis of the liver or something, but in the meantime it makes him happy. He subscribes to the theory that it would be a better world if everyone stayed stewed all the time. Julian's a *happy* drunk."

"I must say you have a remark-

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ably tolerant attitude. Lots of wives, I understand, don't."

"Well, neither did his first one. That's why they were divorced."

"He was married before? I didn't know that."

"Oh, yes. His first wife was very unreasonable about everything, and in my opinion he was lucky to get rid of her. I'll admit he isn't the greatest prize in the world, being soused most of the time and secondhand besides, but the truth is I'm exceptionally fond of him, and we must remember, after all, that he's sort of human and has feelings. I simply won't have people going around accusing him of doing things he didn't do."

"No one has accused him of anything. Anyhow, I was told that you and he were in bed together in your room at the time of the murder."

"That's right. Julian, as usual, was hungover, and I hardly ever get up before noon."

"I was also told that either of you could have been out of the room without the other's being aware of it."

"Julian must have told you that himself. Damned if that isn't just like him! He has no talent whatever for deception, even if it's a matter of his own survival. He's an absolute innocent, that's what he is. Oh, well, what the hell! It's true. If only we had woke up for a morning frolic! That would have been the perfect alibi, wouldn't it? I mean, one doesn't interrupt something like that even to commit a murder."

Marcus, happily, had long ago lost the capacity to blush. He merely wondered if this was an example of incredible candor, or if it was, on the other hand, a particularly sly attempt to appear so.

"You seem to be a very frank person," he said. "Would you mind telling me what you think of Myron Fischer?"

"No, I wouldn't mind."

"I'd appreciate it if you would."

"Oh, Myron's not such a bad sort if you don't expect too much. His main fault is his nose. It's blue."

"I'll try to match your frankness. Do you think Myron could have committed this murder?"

Sandra tilted her head and considered, her bright eyes fixed on Marcus with concentrated innocence—or with, at least, what appeared to be.

"He *could,* I think. Which is not to say he did. It would depend on what reason he was given. For quite a lot of money, for example. Myron loves money, and Judith encourages him in it."

"Quite a lot of money was involved, wasn't there?"

"Oh, yes. The old man was filthy with it. But it's not especially relevant. There was no hurry about anything, I mean. He would have died pretty soon, anyhow, and in the meantime everyone was well taken care of."

"I wonder."

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"Wonder what?"

"I was just thinking that someone might have been in a hurry for a great deal of money in a bundle. Was anyone in that position?"

"Not that I know of."

"Not Myron?"

"What makes you pick on him?"

"Something. But never mind. Do you consider it more likely, as the others do, that the murder was committed by an outsider?"

Tilted head. Bright, inquisitive eyes. Marcus was reminded of a sexy wren.

"Wouldn't it be comfortable to think so?" she said.

"Mr. Dillon," said Marcus, "I believe that you are an old friend of the Fischer family, as well as their lawyer?"

Ambrose Dillon, a lean gray man who somehow gave the impression of being dusty, took a handkerchief from his coat pocket, coughed dryly into it, then put it back into the same pocket, readily available for an encore.

"That is true," he said.

"You must be conversant, then, with their personal affairs, as well as with their financial ones."

"I know a great deal about the latter. As to the former, I did not concern myself unless it was in a matter in which legal counsel was required."

"Neverthless, you must know the members of this family reasonably well."

"That's a fair assessment. Yes."

"Can you tell me why any one of them would have felt impelled to murder the head of the family?"

The handkerchief routine again. Ambrose Dillon, a cautious man, was being cautious.

"Are you convinced that one of them did?"

"At the moment I'm convinced. I may change my mind later."

"Murder is a dreadful crime—patricide especially so. I can think of no one with cause to go to such an extreme."

"Perhaps I could get a little more insight into this case if I knew more about the victim. What kind of man was Myron Fischer, Senior?"

"Well, when he was younger he could be ruthless. Such a quality of character is often required in the accumulation of a fortune. In recent years, however, he had mellowed considerably."

"How was he regarded by his family?"

"He was shown proper respect. Why not? His will provides extremely generously for all his children."

"Equally?"

"I didn't say that. The larger shares go to the sons."

"I was told he imposed a kind of double standard. Do you agree?"

"To a certain extent. He was liberal with Myron and Julian, perhaps too much so. With Agnes he was, let us say, a benevolent despot. For her own good, of course. Poor

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Agnes is not really well. She needs looking after. I must say, however, that many of her ills are imaginary. She is, perhaps, a bit neurotic."

"Has she never married?"

"No. Nor is she likely to. In the past, as I recall, there were a couple of young men with serious intentions, but they were not suitable. One must be careful, you know, where a large inheritance is anticipated."

"I understand. Can you tell me if anyone in the family urgently needed money? A great deal of money?"

"I cannot. But frankly I doubt it."

"It is your conviction, then, that money was not a motive in this case? That is, I mean, if the murder was committed by one of the family?"

The lawyer hesitated. He started to reach for his handkerchief, hesitated again, and reached instead for his glasses. He blinked weakly into the light through the lenses, held at arm's length, reached once more for the handkerchief, and polished the lenses.

"Conviction is a strong word," he said. "I didn't, I believe, go that far. There is something that I should, perhaps, mention. A qualification, as it were. I said a moment ago that old Myron had mellowed. I might have said, in one respect at least, that he was betraying signs of senility. In brief, he had been converted to the absurdity of astrology. Absolutely absorbed in it. He consulted charts and horoscopes and such hocus-pocus before making any significant move. Swore by it. Absolutely wouldn't listen to a word against it."

Marcus remembered the astrology publication on the victim's desk. He had been meaning to ask about it.

"What did astrology have to do with his money?" he said.

"That's precisely the point I was coming to. He followed astrological directions even in financial matters. You know the dreadful kind of bilge. Complete no important business transactions today. Or the stars are favorable for investments. That sort of nonsense. Fortunately, he came no serious croppers. But one never knew. Such an aberation naturally created apprehension."

"The family knew about this?"

"Oh, yes. Certainly. Old Myron was vocal if nothing else. He was forever trying to proselytize. Working for new converts."

"Are you suggesting that one of them grew sufficiently apprehensive about the old man's fortune to kill him before he could dissipate it?"

"I feel bound to suggest the possibility. Merely the possibility."

"This puts a new face on the matter."

"Yes." Ambrose Dillon blinked into the light and sighed. "Unfortunately."

Marcus stood up. A dim shaft of light was beginning to play among the trivia of his littered mind. There

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was, in the litter, a bit of knowledge that was suddenly significant. Unluckily, it was also, for the present, lost. The shaft of light did not expose it.

"Thank you, Mr. Dillon," he said absently. "I may need to talk with you again later."

"I am at your service."

The lawyer left the room, and Marcus, after a moment and by the other door, did likewise. He went in search of the servants and found them, by a stroke of luck, congregated in the kitchen. What he wanted to know was whether any one of them, during the morning tour of duty, had seen anyone enter or leave the library. No one had. Anyone in the hall near the library door? Same answer. Negative.

Marcus went to find Fuller. The ambulance had earlier, Fuller said, taken away the body of old Myron. Fuller had admitted the attendants to the library and had locked the door again after them. Marcus said that was fine.

He said goodbye to the Fischers, who were still, with the exception of Agnes, lingering in the living room. Then, with Fuller a pace behind, he left the house.

Marcus sifted the litter in his mind. He lay abed in his bachelor pad and sought among his disorderly collection of trivia for the scrap of knowledge, whatever it was and however trivial, that he was certain, if only he could recover it, would be a key piece of the puzzle that troubled his mind.

The thing, of course, was to relate if first, even before knowing precisely what it was, to the stimulus that had started his itch. It was something Ambrose Dillon had said. But what? What had the lawyer said? Well, he had been talking about old Myron Fischer's unusual behavior—specifically, about his addiction to the hocus-pocus of astrology, and especially as that addiction imperiled his fortune. He had suggested the possibility, merely the possibility, that old Myron's murderer might have been motivated by an urgent desire to remove the peril by removing old Myron.

There it was—but what was the related scrap of knowledge? What dusty remembrance, stored away carelessly in the debris in his brain, had stirred and started itching at the mention of something?

Damn! thought Marcus. What *is* it?

Usually he went to sleep quickly and slept soundly, in spite of a conscience that was not always easy, and he was miserable when, occasionally, he couldn't. Insomnia was hell. He thought of the vast human enterprise based solely on the production and distribution of pills, capsules, liquids, and powders to get people to sleep at night.

But that was all wrong. It was only temporary expediency. If you want to cure something, you treat the cause, not the effect. Everyone

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knows that. If you can't sleep because you've got an itch, you sift out the cause of the itch and treat it properly. That's diagnosis. It's the only way. But it is, sometimes, exceedingly difficult. How can you treat the cause when you can't isolate it?

He tossed and turned and rolled over and sat up in the darkness on the side of the bed. He found a pack of cigarettes on the bedside table, fumbled one out, and felt for matches. He lit the cigarette and smoked it. It tasted hot and stale, but he smoked it to a tiny butt and crushed the butt in a tray.

Then he stood up and padded barefoot over to a window. He looked out through the window to the sky, and in the sky there were countless stars. He picked a single star and concentrated on it. He repeated to himself the little rhyme of his childhood, the incantation of multitudes of small fry for unnumbered generations.

Starlight, star bright,
First star I've seen tonight.
I wish I may, I wish I might
Have the wish I wish tonight.

Stars? *Stars!* Suddenly he itched no longer. His mind, all at once, was as serene and orderly as the tiny segment of the ordered universe at which he looked through the window.

Turning away, he padded across the bedroom into the living room, where he turned on a light. He went to his bookshelves and took down the basic tool of verbal men. Good old Webster, blessed Noah. He opened the dictionary, found the right page, and stood very still for quite a while, staring at the cause of his itch. Then he replaced the book, turned out the light, and went back to bed.

He was still troubled, but now for a different reason. He was often troubled by the grim finger of guilt, depending on where it pointed, but sometimes he was more deeply troubled than others. As now. In the small hours he felt diminished and saddened. But soon he fell asleep.

In the morning he was at his desk in headquarters when Sergeant Fuller arrived. Marcus had a high-level conference midmorning, and then he continued for a while to work at his desk while Fuller, doing this and that, was in and out. At eleven, when Fuller was in, Marcus stood up.

"Put on your hat, Fuller," he said. "We've got an errand to run."

"Errand?" said Fuller. "What errand?"

"We're going to arrest a murderer."

"Murderer? What murderer?"

"The murderer of old Myron Fischer, of course. Come along."

Fuller stared at him stonily. Bitterness like bile was in his throat and on his tongue. Just like that! Come along, Fuller. We're going to arrest a murderer, Fuller. The murderer of old Myron Fischer, Fuller.

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Of course, Fuller. It's all magic. It's all tricks. When you need a murderer, you just pull one out of your hat.

"Am I allowed," said Fuller, "to know who the murderer is?"

"In good time. There's still a minor problem. I know, but I can't prove that I know. No evidence—not a shred."

"Don't you think it would be advisable to get proof before you make an arrest?"

"Ordinarily, yes. In this case, no. When our murderer is confronted, I think collapse will be imminent. Confessions are as good as evidence, Fuller."

With Marcus at the wheel, separated by their interval of animus, they drove to the Fischer residence. Silent on the way, Fuller reflected in his bitterness that Marcus was a ham. That was why he wouldn't mention a name. That was why he'd waited until everyone in the Fischer loony bin would likely be astir. He wanted an audience, he wanted to put on a show. Which was, to be honest, true.

They were admitted by Samson, who led them to the living room. In the living room they found Myron, sober, and Julian, still or again soused, and Judith holding a cup and saucer, which she set aside when Marcus entered with Fuller at his heels. Sandra, having heard them arrive, came in from the dining room with a scrap of buttered toast in her hand. Missing were Agnes, who was nursing another migraine, and Ambrose Dillon, who was no longer a house guest.

"I'm fortunate to find you together," Marcus said. "I have something to tell you all."

"Shall I send Samson for Agnes?" Judith said.

"Not now. She's not essential at the moment. Nor is Mr. Dillon. If you will all sit down and listen, I'll tell you who killed Myron Fischer."

It was a good line. Effective. Even Fuller grudgingly conceded it. The younger Myron sank slowly into a chair, his face the color of ashes. Julian, who had not risen, reached for his glass on a table by his chair. Judith sat down on a sofa with a strange soft sound that was almost a whimper. Sandra crossed over and sat on the arm of Julian's chair. Defensively, thought Marcus.

"Do you mean," said Myron, "that you really know who killed Father."

"Yes, I do."

"He knows," Julian said. "By George, I believe he really does. And it's a shame. It's a damn shame."

"Murder is always a shame," Marcus said. "Not that I know anything that every one of you doesn't know or can't easily find out . . . I went astray in the beginning because the victim was rich, and the house was full of heirs. The victim had been, moreover, jeopardizing his estate with astrological folderol. That was a complication, but it was

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a complication that led, in the end, to the truth.

"The motivation for this murder was not avarice. It was hatred. Long-festering hatred with, I think, a touch of madness. It grew from the hard soil of an empty life. It was the tardy effect of years of petty despotism and meddling that prevented, I'll venture, all efforts to seek a personal life and an intimate love. What specific incident incited the murder, I don't know. It doesn't really matter. It was only the straw that broke the camel's back. You were lucky, in this family, if you were born male.

"I got it by working backward. Motivation is based on the murderer's identity. Well, I can't take any credit for discovering that—Myron Fischer himself identified his murderer. Remember the dying message I took to be an *M* and a *y*, badly written and cramped together? Myron Fischer did not write two letters. Steeped in astrology, he wrote an astrological symbol. If you will consult your Webster's, you will find it for yourselves. The sixth division of the zodiac. Virgo. The Virgin."

Marcus was silent, and so was the room. The Lieutenant's sense of diminishment and sadness had returned stronger than before.

"Now you can send for Agnes," he said. "Now she's essential."

ANSWERS to Entrance Lines

(*See Quiz on pages 94-95*)

1. Philo Vance in S. S. Van Dine's THE BENSON MURDER CASE (1926).
2. Nero Wolfe in Rex Stout's FER-DE-LANCE (1934).
3. Ellery Queen in Ellery Queen's THE ROMAN HAT MYSTERY (1929).
4. Charlie Chan in Earl Derr Biggers' THE HOUSE WITHOUT A KEY (1925).
5. James Bond in Ian Fleming's CASINO ROYALE (1953).
6. The Great Merlini in Clayton Rawson's DEATH FROM A TOP HAT (1938).
7. Sherlock Holmes in A. Conan Doyle's A STUDY IN SCARLET (1887).
8. C. Auguste Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841).
9. Father Brown in G. K. Chesterton's *The Blue Cross* from THE INNOCENCE OF FATHER BROWN (1911).

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a GIDEON novelet by
J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

police procedural—English style

John Creasey is a man of many homicidal hats. We don't know all the pen names he has used, and is still using (perhaps Mr. Creasey himself doesn't remember!). But here, for the record, are his most important "lines":

Under his own name, as John Creasey: the Superintendent "Handsome" West series
As J. J. Marric: the Commander George Gideon series
As Kyle Hunt: the Dr. Emmanuel Cellini series
As Anthony Morton: the Baron (John Mannering) series
Also: books by John Creasey as by Jeremy York and Gordon Ashe

Is John Creasey the most prolific mystery writer of all time? The most pseudonymous? . . .

In this Gideon novelet, J. J. Marric is up to his procedural patterns and 'tec tricks: a Western Big Four Summit Meeting is to take place in London, and Commander Gideon, of the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard, is the man chiefly responsible for the public safety. His problems are both simple and complex: the simple expectation is that the professional pickpockets, shoplifters, and bag snatchers of London will be out in full force—to say nothing of all the other criminals smelling a Crooks' Harvest. The complex expectation is an invasion of criminals from outside London and the possibility of a pitched battle between rival gangs; if that happened Gideon would need an army of policemen and detectives for his counterattack, and even then his lines would be stretched very thin . . .

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GIDEON'S WAR

by J. J. MARRIC

WHEN THE EVENING NEWSPAPERS came out with their headlines:

Western Summit for London
Big Four Meet in June

and gave details already released by the Home Office about the procession route for the State Visits, some men's eyes sparkled at thought of the illegal profit likely to come their way as a result.

One of these was a little perky man named Alec Sonnley. He had bright green-gray eyes in a shiny little pink-and-red face, and was always smartly dressed. When the sun shone on him he looked rather like an apple half hidden by leaves, for he wore a green hat and his clothes were always gray-green or browny-green. The most noticeable things about him, apart from his rosy, shiny complexion, were his hands and feet, which were much larger than average, making a man of five feet six look a little ridiculous.

Everyone called him Sonny Boy, partly because of his name, partly because of his habit of whistling popular songs—like an errand boy. He had carefully and very skillfully organized a business in London which had all the outward appearance of being legitimate. He ran a large wholesale warehouse in the Petticoat Lane district of the East End, from which he supplied street traders and hawkers, as well as small shopkeepers from the Greater London area.

In addition to this he owned thirty shops, all in popular shopping areas, all dealing in what he called *'Fancy Goods, Jewellery, Gold and Silver Articles.'* In each shop he had a manager and two or three assistants, and each member of the staff was strictly honest—none of them knew that he or she was dealing in stolen goods.

To make discovery much less likely, Alec Sonnley bought up a great deal of bankrupt stocks, salvaged goods, and low-priced ornaments, in all of which he did good business. No single item in any of his stores cost over five pounds, and he had a series of "Special Advertising Offers" at five shillings and ten shillings each. At least half his stocks were stolen goods.

He also had the third aspect of the business worked out just as carefully as the retail and wholesale angles. He used six shoplifters and eight handbag and pocket pickers, or snatchers and dips. This team operated in big shopping areas, concentrating on stealing famous-brand goods, which were taken to the retail outlets and sold quickly.

Every now and then, especially

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when he believed that the police suspected one of them, Sonnley "rested" these operatives, but because of the retainer he paid them they were ready to work again the moment he felt it safe.

The great simplicity of his system helped Sonnley to his huge success. Quick-selling goods stolen from one part of London were often on sale in another part on the same day, for he had a plain truck driven by his chief operative, a man named Benny Klein, who made the rounds regularly, collecting and delivering. Anything of high value, Sonnley disposed of through ordinary receivers.

No one knew quite how much he was worth, but it probably approached half a million pounds.

Any attraction which drew the crowds to the heart of London would set Sonny Boy whistling chirpily. His pickpockets, bag snatchers, and shoplifters often quadrupled their takings on such occasions, and his wholesale warehouse supplied hundreds of street traders with souvenirs.

That Tuesday he drove from the small suite of offices in a narrow street near Baker Street Station, and out of the corner of his eye saw a newspaper placard: *Western Summit for London.*

He slowed down by the next newsboy and bought a newspaper. Very soon he began to whistle, and the whistle became positively gay while he drove to St. John's Wood, where he had an apartment near Regent's Park. He turned into the underground garage, then whistled his way across to the elevator which would take him up to the seventh floor, and his wife. She was a plump, good-natured woman with thin metallic-looking reddish yellow hair. She loved expensive clothes, loved her Sonny Boy, and, rather unexpectedly, loved cooking. So Sonnley went home to lunch whenever he could.

His tune was rounded and full as he stepped out opposite his apartment, Number 17, and let himself in. There was a faint aroma of frying onions, which suggested a steak or mixed grill. When he went into the kitchen, the steaks were sizzling and the onions clucking.

Rosie glanced round, saw him, and immediately plunged a basket of newly sliced chips into a saucepan of boiling fat, causing a great hiss and a cloud of steam.

Sonnley went across and slid his arm round his wife's comfortable bosom, squeezed, gave her neck a peck of a kiss, and said:

"I hope it's good. We've got a lot to celebrate."

"Oh, have we, Sonny dear?" said Rose. "What is it?"

"Believe it nor not, sweetie-pie, we're going to have a State Procession for a great big Western Four Power Summit meeting in li'l old London Town," declared Sonnley, and held the newspaper up.

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Reading, Rosie looked more and more puzzled.

"I'm sure it will be very nice, dear. Can I have a seat?"

"A what?"

"There are bound to be some wonderful stands put up for the Procession. In the Mall, I shouldn't wonder, or perhaps near the Abbey. You know, where the Houses of Parliament are." Rosie prodded a steak. "It's a pity it isn't a wedding, really. I do love to see them coming out of the Abbey with their lovely dresses. There will be stands, won't there?"

"You can bet your life there will!"

"And can I have a seat?"

"Front row, dead center, the best there is," Sonnley promised. "Rosie, that steak smells wonderful. How long will it be?"

"About ten minutes."

"Just time for me to make a phone call," said Sonnley.

He went out in the hallway, rubbing his hands, turned into a big drawing room which overlooked the park, beyond the gardens of the building. The drawing room had been furnished by a large London store, and although Sonnley was never sure why, he realized that it was as nearly perfect as it could be. The colorings were wine-red and pale blue, setting off the mid-Nineteenth Century French furniture.

He sat at the end of a long couch, dialed a Whitehall number, and was answered almost at once by a man with a slightly foreign accent.

"Benny, you seen the papers?" Sonnley asked.

"Sure, I've seen the papers," answered Benny Klein. "I thought I'd be hearing from you."

"Just have a word with all the boys and girls, and tell them to take a week or two off," said Sonnley. "I don't want anyone in trouble between now and you-know-when. All okay?"

"Holiday with pay, is it?"

"You've got it in one, Benny," Sonnley agreed. "And I've got a little vacation planned for you, too."

"*Me?* I'm going to the Riviera, Sonny Boy. You know that."

"Not now you're not," Sonnley declared. "Buy your doll a nice diamond bracelet, and tell her to stay home and be a good girl."

"I'm not gong to alter my plans for anybody." Klein was suddenly harsh-voiced.

"Now take it easy, Benny, take it easy! No one said anything about altering your plans. It's just a little postponement, that's all. You can take the girl with you if she loves you so much! You're going up to Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham, and you're going to tell the boys up there to keep out of the Big Smoke when the V.I.P.s are here. We don't want any of those provincials muscling in on our London, do we?"

When Klein didn't answer, Sonnley repeated sharply, "Do we?"

Klein said gruffly, "No, we don't."

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"And I don't know anyone who can tell them that better than Benny Klein," went on Sonnley. "Just make them understand that they keep out. See? If they don't, they'll run into a lot of trouble."

"They'll understand," Klein asserted in a stronger voice.

"That's more like it," Sonnley approved. "Tell them I'll organize every gang of razor and chain-boys in London if provincials come down here. And when you've warned them good and proper, Benny, you can come down here and talk to the London gangs."

After a pause, Klein said, "The London gangs will want some dough."

"They'll get it, don't you worry. The same terms as for Maggie's wedding—they'll be okay. And tell your lady friend you'll buy her a mink stole as well, if she forgets all about the Contingong." Sonnley chuckled. "Okay, Benny?"

"I suppose so."

"I thought it would be," Sonnley said. "See you, boy."

He rang off, stood for a moment by the telephone, frowning. If Klein should get awkward, it would create a lot of difficulties.

"But he won't get awkward," Sonnley reassured himself, and began to whistle, if on a slightly subdued note.

After a few minutes he joined Rosie, who had now laid the table. A steak which looked juicy and tender teased Sonnley from the silver dish. The chips were a golden brown, and there were peas and broad beans as well as deep-fried onion rings.

"What's the matter, Sonny? Doesn't it look nice?" inquired Rosie.

"Blimey, it looks as if it's sitting up and begging to be eaten! I was just thinking about a business acquaintance who might need a little watching. Now, let's go!"

Sitting in a small Chelsea café and tucking into a plate of bacon, sausages, eggs, and chips was Michael Lumati, well known to Alec Sonnley, and also well known to the police, although it was now three years since he had been under suspicion of any crime, and five since he had been in prison.

On that occasion he had earned full remission after a three-year sentence for issuing forged banknotes. Nowadays, he now earned a reasonable living by selling lightning portraits at fairs and race tracks, and designing calendars, programs and catalogues—including Sonnley's.

Lumati had a small studio at the top of an old condemned building of Chelsea, and he spent a lot of time in the studio, usually cooking his own breakfast and evening meal, but going out for lunch. Today he sat in a corner of the café, a man nearing fifty, rather thin, with a healthy-looking tanned complexion, very clear gray eyes, and a small Van Dyck beard. That, and the faded beret which he always wore at

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the back of his head, made him look the part of an artist.

Some of his craftsmanship, at its best in copies of currency notes, was unbelievably good.

He had a copy of the London *Standard* propped up against the wall at his side and kept reading the story of the coming State Procession. There was a calculating expression in his eyes. The police did not know that, after years of experiment and error, Lumati had succeeded in drawing a line which looked as if it were a tiny thread through the paper—making visual detection nearly impossible; nor did the police know that he had tens of thousands of these one-pound and ten-shilling notes printed and ready for distribution.

He knew a man who would want plenty of paper money at the time of the Visit, too.

Sonny Boy Sonnley.

The following Saturday morning Commander Gideon of the Criminal Investigation Department at New Scotland Yard felt irritable without quite knowing why. Preparations for the Visit were going reasonably well and no particular crime was worrying him. On Saturdays he always had a roll call of unsolved crimes, and investigations all seemed to be ticking over nicely.

Nevertheless, he had a sense that he had missed some factor of importance.

He had told Joe Bell, his chief assistant, to contact all the provincial forces, asking them to arrange to send men to London for the Visit, and they had all promised to get busy. It was too early to expect any squeals from the East End, or to guess what the wide boys were planning. His mood might be due to the weather, it was cold and blustery.

Standing by his window he could see the choppy waters of the Thames; why did the weather always seem to break at week-ends?

At a quarter past ten there was a bang at the door and Superintendent Lemaitre came in. An old friend of Gideon's, Lemaitre was a senior detective with one big fault, which somehow showed in his Cockney voice, with its overtone of slick confidence.

"Hiyah, George!" He came in briskly, waved to Bell, and added, "Joe," and shook Gideon's hand. He sat on a corner of Gideon's desk, bony fists clenched, a confident and happy-looking man given to taking too much for granted and jumping too quickly to conclusions. "I'm back full of the joys and ready for anything. Just had ten days down by the briny—got in a couple of dips every day. My wife's so brown you wouldn't think she'd been decent! She wants to know if you and Kate can come round to tea or supper tomorrow."

"If Kate hasn't booked anything, we'd like to," said Gideon. "Then you can make your wife a police widow for a week or so."

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"What's all this? I'm just the man you want for the Big Visit."

"So you are. For Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, and the rest, to check whether any of their boys are planning an offensive in London during the Visit."

"Okay, okay," said Lemaitre. "When do you want me to go?"

"Tuesday."

"Right-i-ho!" Lemaitre slapped his hands together. "Won't be sorry to get out of this den of vice for a bit. Don't forget to ask Kate about tomorrow."

On the Sunday when the Gideons had afternoon tea with the Lemaitres, Benny Klein and Jack Gorra, the leader of Glasgow's Blacks, were considering the other side of the picture. They felt very pleased with themselves, for they had hatched out a plot together—one man who had been adopted by Great Britain and given its nationality, the other the leader of the most vicious gang north of the Tweed. Their plan was simple, and depended entirely on perfect timing.

Instead of Sonny Boy Sonnley's pickpockets and bag snatchers reaping a harvest during the Visit, the Glasgow Blacks would descend on London.

Whenever they had done this in the past there had been a clash with the London crooks, often a pitched battle. Klein had suggested, and Gorra had agreed, that this was a crazy way to do it.

"All you want to do is put Sonny Boy's artists out of action for a few days," Klein had said. "Then London's wide-open."

"You're telling me what to do. Just go ahead and tell me how." Gorra was a thickset man with a small round head covered with a gingery bristle. His short, pale eyelashes and stubby eyebrows made him look almost like an albino; his pale blue eyes seemed to stare fixedly all the time.

"You ever seen a dip or a bagman work with burned fingers?" Klein inquired.

At first that did not make sense to Gorra, but the light began to dawn as Klein went on:

"We've only got to work out a way to burn the fingers of Sonnley's artists, and we're a winner."

"Acid would do the trick, a hot acid. Corrosive acid, that's what we want," Gorra put in eagerly. "The only question is how to get it onto the right fingers."

Klein grinned.

On the Thursday of the same week Gideon drove past the Mint, reflecting that hordes of people would come here during the Visit; he must soon have a word with the City Police, who would be in charge here.

He turned into Aldgate, where London seemed suddenly to become a working-class suburb. Traffic was moving at a crawl, fumes were stinking, motors growled on a

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sullen note. He worked his way round the mean streets to NE Divisional Police Headquarters and it was a quarter to one when he entered Christy's office.

Hugh Christy was fairly new at NE Division, which was the toughest in London. He was in his middle-forties, military in appearance and manner, brisk in movement and in speech, with rather a big head, and a manner which often seemed aggressive. Bighead was the nickname most often applied to him, but it was no longer harsh and censorious. Christy had proved in two years that he was able and shrewd.

As he shook hands and showed Gideon a chair, all in one movement, he said:

"I've got a couple of big steaks on order; they're ready to go under the grill when I press the button."

"Suits me fine," Gideon approved.

Christy's finger prodded a bell push, twice. Then he squared his shoulders and sat very erect behind his flat-topped desk.

"They'll come in and get the table ready ten minutes before we start to eat," he announced. "Any complaints, George?"

"Lot of worry," replied Gideon mildly. "I'll need all the men you can spare, uniformed and C.I.D., for the big show, and there's a lot of spade work between now and then."

"Any special angles?" Christy inquired. "I heard a buzz that Benny Klein, Alec Sonnley's right-hand man, is out of town."

"He went off north with the blonde he's living with, and didn't tell anyone where he was going."

"Come to think, a lot of Sonnley's boys have gone off on holiday," Christy reported thoughtfully. "I noticed that earlier in the week, and doubt if they're just taking advantage of the weather. Think Sonny Boy Sonnley is preparing for the big show?"

"Probably. How many shops has he got in your manor?"

"Three."

"Concentrate on them," urged Gideon. "I'll have all his others closely watched, too. With luck we'll get him on this job. But don't have any of Sonnley's or Klein's boys followed unless Lemaitre asks you to. He's gone to find out what Klein's up to."

"Everyone on the ball," Christy approved.

They were in the middle of thick steaks, chips, and fried onions when a call came for Gideon from Liverpool. He soaked up a tempting pool of rich gravy into a piece of bread before taking the telephone.

"Having a nice quiet time down there, George?" It was Lemaitre. "That's good—get your strength up. I've nearly finished this job, so save Soho for me, will you?"

"It's sold," said Gideon.

"Lecherous old devil! Well, I got-ta bit of news for you, pal," Lemaitre rejoiced. "Benny Klein spent the week-end in Glasgow, with a girl friend and Jack Gorra. He's

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been using Glasgow as a center and moving about the north. I've been to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Liverpool. None of the top coppers has heard of any exodus of their bad boys—all the best provincial crooks seem to be staying at home."

"Any idea why?" inquired Gideon.

"Got a coupla squeaks," Lemaitre reported with deep satisfaction. "Benny Klein's paying each leader five hundred quid to keep his boys local. He's been here in Manchester and talked to all the big boys. Now he's going back to Glasgow. The word is that the Glasgow group will be in London for the Visit, but the others will stay home."

"You mean Gorra of Glasgow is going to defy Klein?"

Gideon could see the inevitable consequences of such an invasion, and it wasn't a reassuring picture. It would almost certainly lead to warfare between powerful gangs of pickpockets and shoplifters, and might well bring out the razors and the bicycle chains, the coshes and the flick knives. If that happened, police urgently needed for normal crowd control would have to be diverted, which would create a lot of difficulties.

"That's the fishy smell," Lemaitre told him. "Klein and Jack Gorra are like old buddies."

"Think Klein's fooled Gorra?" Gideon wanted to know.

"I don't know what it means," Lemaitre confessed. "I just don't like it."

"I'll warn the Divisions," Gideon promised. "Lem, while you're on—ask Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham if they could spare us a hundred men, say. Just see how the wind blows. If they'll play I'll get an official request sent up from the Commissioner, but we don't want to ask and be refused."

"Right," said Lemaitre. "I'm going down to Bristol tonight, and should be back on Saturday. Okay?"

"Fine."

"Take care of Soho for me," Lemaitre quipped, and rang off.

In Glasgow at that particular moment Benny Klein was experimenting with a little water pistol, using corrosive acid in the rubber holder instead of water. Tomorrow morning he would know how the rubber stood up to the acid. If it burned through, he would have to think of something else.

Jack Gorra was watching, when one of his runners tapped at the door. He went to answer it, talked in undertones, then came back and waited until the end of the experiment before repeating:

"Lemaitre's been in Glasgow, asking questions."

"I hope it keeps fine for him," Benny Klein said.

Without a pause he moved to a small cage, where a mouse was squealing and squirming.

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His sharp-featured, sallow face was twisted in an expression of beastly delight as he watched the helpless creature. It was stuck to a small chromium-plated tube which he had smeared with vitriol overnight, and left to dry. Only it hadn't dried; the squeals and antics of the mouse proved that.

"Pity that's not Sonny Boy," Klein said, and Gorra laughed.

Michael Lumati was also thinking about Sonnley. He was sitting pretty with fifteen thousand pounds of near-perfect currency notes, and still his only worry was how to get them distributed.

He had to admit that he needed someone with a lot of shops, or a lot of barrows, and someone with a big turnover during the Visit. The real truth was that he ought to use Sonnley, who had already ordered artwork for special *Souvenir Programmes* for the occasion.

"Mr. Sonnley, I've got an idea for a special Visit Souvenir Catalogue, and another way of making a bit of quick dough," Lumati said on the telephone. "Could you spare me half an hour?"

"Let's have a drink together," said Sonnley, who prided himself that he never missed a chance.

Michael Lumati left his studio, took a Number 11 bus to Fulham Broadway, then sauntered toward North End Road, where the litter from the previous day's market had not yet been properly cleared. He turned into a public house and went upstairs to a private lounge. He could hear a man whistling *Some Enchanted Evening*. He tapped at the door, the whistling stopped, and Alec Sonnley called:

"That you, Lummy?"

"It's me, Sonny Boy."

"Come right in." Sonnley was standing by a window hung with dark green curtains. An aspidistra stood on a small table in the middle of the room, which was like one preserved as a mid-Victorian relic.

"What are you going to have?" he asked, and turned to a table on which there were dozens of bottles of beer.

"I'll have a pale." Lumati sat down in an old-fashioned saddleback armchair as Sonnley poured.

"Got those samples?" Sonnley asked.

Lumati didn't answer.

"Now listen, Lummy, have you got them or haven't you? If you're still worrying about the busies, forget it—we've got those souvenir programs to show we're in legitimate business together. But if you're thinking of asking for more than fifty-fifty, forget that too. I'm taking just as big a risk as you are. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes, I know," said Lumati.

"Telling me you don't trust me?"

"I trust you," said Lumati, eyeing the little man closely. "But I'm not sure I trust your pal, Klein."

"Listen, Lummy," said Sonnley. "I've worked with Klein for over

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ten years. They don't come any smarter, but I wouldn't trust him round the corner. Klein's not in this. He's looking after the usual business for me. He's been up in the North and the Midlands, making sure we don't have trouble with those boys. I'll spread your stuff round myself with the takings from my branches, and I'll pay a lot of my bills with them. I'll spread some out with bookies, too. Don't you worry. I'll get rid of most of it in a week. Now, where's the samples?"

Lumati took an envelope from his pocket, and handed it over. Sonnley slit it open and pulled out the notes inside; there were five. He rustled one in his fingers, put the five down on a table, and flipped them like a bank teller. Then he took them to a window, and, standing to one side, held one up to the light.

The thread showed through clearly, and so did the watermark; it was a remarkable job of counterfeiting. He swung round and clapped Lumati on the shoulder.

"That's the best job I've ever seen in my life, Lum! It's an absolute winner."

"It's the best job that's ever been done," said Lumati. His little beard waggled in his excitement. "And I've got fifteen thousand quids' worth of them. It's a deal, then. You won't tell Klein?"

"Cross my heart."

"And you pay me fifty per cent of the face value, on delivery."

"Lum, just to show how much I trust you, I've brought three thousand quid in real English dough along with me—it's in that little case over there. Don't get it mixed up with your own specialty, will you?"

When Sonnley left soon afterward, he was whistling as merrily as could be, his green Tyrolean hat stuck jauntily on one side of his head. He whistled all the way home, all the way up to Rosie, and all the time he was washing his hands before lunch. He was halfway through a steamed steak-and-kidney pudding of mouth-watering succulence when the telephone bell rang.

"I'll get it, Sonny," Rosie said, and puffed a few straying hairs away from her nose, got up, and waddled across to the telephone in a corner; she knew how Sonny Boy disliked being interrupted while eating.

"Hello, who's that?" she inquired disinterestedly, and then she said, "Oh, Mrs. Whittaker, hello dear, how are you? . . . Well, I *am* sorry . . . Well I never . . . Well, what a funny thing to happen. Has he tried olive oil? It's ever so soothing . . . Oh, I see . . . Well, he's busy now, dear—"

She glanced across at Sonnley, who was scooping up a forkful of succulent brown meat and gravy-soaked suet crust. He waved his knife at her, and she went on, "He's just come in, dear, wait a minute."

She covered the mouthpiece with her podgy hand as she called to Sonnley, "Dick Whittaker's burned

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his hands something cruel. He's had to go to a doctor."

"The damn fool, he's due to start work next week," Sonnley said disgustedly, and grabbed the telephone. "Sonnley speaking. What's all this about . . .?"

He broke off, listening more intently, and when he spoke again his voice was subdued and the expression in his eyes was very different, and very thoughtful.

"All right, tell him not to worry. I'll stake him," he said curtly, and rang off.

He stared at his wife, who sat down placidly although she had just learned that one of the cleverest pickpockets in the business had burned his hands so badly that he would not be able to operate during the Visit.

Someone had smeared vitriol on the handlebars of his motorscooter.

When Klein came into his office the next morning, Sonnley sat reading some letters, without looking up. Klein took out cigarettes, lit one, and dropped the spent match into an ashtray close to Sonnley's right hand.

"Remember me?" he said. "I've got news for you."

Sonnley looked straight into his eyes, paused, and asked:

"What news?"

Sonnley never admitted it to a soul, but Klein's answer took him completely by surprise, and almost broke up his poker face. The answer was one word, spoken with that guttural accent, taking on a kind of menace which Sonnley had not known for a long time.

"Cops," said Klein.

"What the hell do you mean, cops?"

"I mean busies, dicks, bloody flatfoots," said Klein. "They're watching my van. They followed me this morning. There's a couple outside now—one of them was at the station when I got back last night, one was outside here when I arrived. Think he was waiting to pass the time of day with me? What have you been doing?"

"I don't believe—" Sonnley began.

"You take a look," invited Klein.

Sonnley stood up, slowly, and went to the window. On the other side of the street, standing by a telephone booth and reading a newspaper, was a tall heavily-built man; another, taller, thinner man was strolling along.

"What have you been up to, to bring them as close as this?" demanded Klein.

"It's just routine," Sonnley said.

"Okay, then, it's just routine," said Klein. "But if I start collecting the stuff from the boys and girls and get copped, I'll be back on the Moor, and that's a routine I don't like. I've got some more news for you."

"Now, listen, Benny—"

"I want out," said Klein. "I want five thousand quid as a golden handshake, and then I'll fade. I'm not taking any chances."

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Sonnley returned to his desk, sat down, and looked again into the other man's bright gray eyes. He had known that one day a break would come, but he hadn't expected blackmail, and hadn't expected trouble to come so suddenly.

He took out a checkered green and white handkerchief, and dabbed at his forehead. Klein didn't shift his gaze. He had one hand clenched on the desk, another wth the palm upward, the fingers crooked and beckoning.

"Give," he said.

Sonnley still didn't speak. Klein leaned across the desk so that Sonnley could feel the warmth of his breath, and repeated:

"Give."

Sonnley said thinly, "Not a penny."

"Say that again and I'll break your neck."

"Then you'll go inside for the rest of your life."

Klein's eyes narrowed, as if he hadn't expected such tough resistance.

"Sonny Boy, don't get me wrong," he said. "I want out and I want five thousand quid, and that's how it's going to be."

"Benny," said Sonnley, in a voice which shook a little, "you aren't going to get another penny from me unless you see the next ten days through—until the Visit's over. You can please yourself."

Klein was towering over him, lips drawn back. There was silence in the room for what seemed a very long time, and with every second it looked as if Klein would explode into action. Before he did, while the breath was hissing through his mouth, Sonnley said in a soft voice:

"Who smeared vitriol on Dicky Whittaker's motorscooter?"

For a moment Klein's expression did not change; he still looked as if he would burst into violent action. Then he blinked. He closed his lips, moistened them, and said, "What's that?" and drew back a pace, as if his rage had suddenly died away. "What's that?"

"You heard."

"Come again."

"Who smeared vitriol on the handlebars of Dicky Whittaker's motorscooter?"

"Someone did *that*?" Klein sighed.

"You've been back in London since last night and no one told you?"

Klein said, still sighingly, "You're telling me, aren't you?" He moistened his lips again. "Because the cops were watching, I kept away from all the boys. I didn't hear anything. Can't Dicky work?"

"He can't work."

Klein said, "Who did it, that's what I want to know?"

"That's what I want to know, too," said Sonnley. "If you want that five thousand quid you find out who did it."

"Who would hate Dicky as much as that?"

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"Just find out and let me know quick," said Sonnley. "Because when I find out who did it I'll break him. Understand?" He stared levelly, coldly, into Klein's eyes. "Whoever it was, I'll break him for good. Just remember that."

"I'll find him," Klein said. "I'll find the swine."

Sonnley watched him as he turned away and went out, and saw no change in his expression. Sonnley jumped up from the desk, stepped swiftly to the door, pulled it open, and saw Klein halfway across the room beyond, still looking astounded. If he knew more than he pretended, he was covering it well.

Did he know? Or was he as shocked as he made out?

Gideon reached his office at a quarter to eight next morning, Saturday, to find Bell already there. Only the night staff was at the Yard, and Gideon had the usual Saturday morning feeling, that everyone was anxious to get through his job as soon as possible.

A messenger came in with a huge bundle of mail, and envelopes of all shapes and sizes were piled high in front of Bell. He scowled. It was too early for the secretarial staff to be here.

"Has Lemaitre been in?"

"No," answered Bell.

"I'm still puzzled about that Glasgow business," Gideon remarked. "Telephone them and ask for the latest on Jack Gorra, will you?"

There was no special news of Gorra, or of any of the provincial gangs, but Lemaitre seemed convinced that Gorra's boys would come down to work with Sonnley's.

Gideon's telephone rang, and he lifted it while glancing at another report. It was Christy of NE Division.

"Yes, Hugh?"

"Funny thing happened you ought to know about," said Christy. "Remember Dicky Whittaker?" On the instant Gideon pictured a tall, very thin, sorrowful-looking man, who had often been inside for picking pockets and snatching handbags; he was probably the cleverest man in London at either job.

"I remember him."

"He's burned the skin off his hands. Someone smeared his scooter handles with vitriol, and put him out of business." Christy gave a snort, smothering a laugh.

"Sonny Boy won't be pleased," remarked Gideon, thoughtfully. "I wish I knew what was going on with that crowd. Thanks, Hugh."

He felt uneasy, as he often did, but there was no time to sit back and think this problem out. He sent a chit round to other Divisions, asking for reports on any similar hand-burning incidents, and also told Lemaitre to keep on the look-out. That was as much as he could do, for the Visit was almost on top of them.

Security men from France, Germany and the United States were virtually in possession at the Yard,

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where the tempo of the preparations was reaching fever pitch. Reinforcements from all over the country were arriving in London hourly, and plans had to be made to house and feed them.

Tension was building up on high, too. The Commissioner was pushed by the Home Secretary, who was being pressured by the Cabinet to make sure that nothing went wrong.

The situation was complicated by the mood of Cox, Deputy Commander of *Uniform*, who seemed convinced that he, Gideon, had deliberately stolen his thunder. Together, they toured the routes from the airport, and checked the Procession route thoroughly, looking for any possible weakness in the security plans. In spite of it all, his first job when he returned to the office was to call Lemaitre.

"Don't you worry, Gee-Gee," Lemaitre said cockily. "I'll look after Sonny Boy."

"You'll have to," Gideon said almost sourly. "Keep your eyes wide open tomorrow, Lem."

Saturday, the first day London was likely to be flooded with visitors, was also the first day planned for a mass attack by Sonnley's men. Sonnley had not whistled very much in the past few days. He was worried, although there were some reasons for thinking that the worst of his worries might be over. The police were taking comparatively little notice of him, and he knew that they were stretched very thin. Probably the surveillance earlier in the week had been in an effort to scare him and Klein.

After the news of the "accident" to Whittaker, Klein seemed to have become obsessed with the idea of finding out who had smeared those handlebars, but he had failed. No other burned fingers had been reported, and as far as Sonnley's scouts in the big provincial cities knew, there was no movement toward London. Klein seemed to have paid them to stay out of the big smoke, as instructed, and that was just as Sonnley wanted it.

He told himself that Klein was reliable at least until he had been paid off, but would have to be watched very carefully afterward. Meanwhile, Sonnley double-checked his own arrangements.

He meant to have an alibi which no one could possibly break. He had to make sure that the money was collected and paid into the bank quickly and that no time was lost moving the stolen goods. He also wanted to distribute Lumati's money which was stored in the cellar of one of his shops—but for some subconscious reason he held that back.

At the back of Sonnley's mind there was one way in which he could use the slush, but his immediate concern was to see that his own plans worked smoothly.

On Saturday morning he gave Rosie a peck of a kiss and went outside. It was bright and sunny, and

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by the time he reached the garage at the back of the flats he was whistling cheerfully; good weather was just what his "artists" wanted.

He slid into the driving seat, switched on the ignition, and took the wheel. Immediately he felt something sticky and wet, and for a moment it puzzled him. Then, seconds before the acid began to burn, he realized what it was.

He snatched his hands away and sat absolutely still, eyes glaring, hands crooked, the burning getting worse with every passing second. Soon he made choking noises in his throat, as if he were fighting for breath.

That day, the day which should have been Sonny Boy Sonnley's greatest harvest, his "artists" left home for the West End of London, all of them on bicycles, scooters, and motorcycles; none of them used cars, because of the need for quick getaways.

All went among the crowds for the first of their jobs. The weather was so lovely that it made the people happy and careless, and pockets and handbags were easy plucking. In all, fourteen of the men made good first pickings, and hurried back to their machines.

Exactly the same thing happened in each case, though in different places.

Each man gripped the handlebars and started off; after a few seconds each pulled into the curb, snatching his hands from the bars and looking down. Each saw hands and fingers which were already red and blistering and beginning to cause agony.

Man after man jumped off his machine, bystanders staring at them as they waved their hands about wildly.

The police were soon alerted.

Superintendent Lemaitre pulled up in his blue Humber outside Gideon's front door early that afternoon and Gideon saw him from the bedroom, where he was mending a spring blind. Kate was out shopping. Gideon was on call, and judging from Lemaitre's expression, this was an urgent one.

He smiled to himself as Lemaitre disappeared along the path, and carried a mind-picture of the tall, thin, rather gawkish man, with spotted red-and-white bow tie, gray overcheck suit which somehow contrived to be loud, and narrow-brimmed trilby set at a jaunty angle on the side of his head.

The bell rang twice before Gideon could get to the door.

"In a hurry, Lem?" he asked.

"In a blurry hurry," Lemaitre cracked, and there was excitement but not anxiety in his eyes. "Gottabitta news for you!"

He came in, almost as familiar with the house as Gideon, and went on boisterously, "Remember old Dicky Whittaker? Poor old Dicky with the blistered fingers?"

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"Well?"

"We've had nine cases of blistered fingers reported this afternoon," Lemaitre announced joyfully. "Every one of them a Klein and Sonny Boy man! How about that, George?"

Without giving Gideon a chance to respond, Lemaitre careered on, taking a slip of paper from his pocket. "Every one of the baskets was caught with his pockets stuffed with loot, George. Every one's a dead cert for three years inside, after hospital treatment. Some of their hands —you should see! Raw isn't the word. But the thing is, I know what's on."

Gideon said cautiously, "Do you?"

"That's right, that's right, tell me I'm jumping to conclusions again. This time I'm bang on the ball."

Lemaitre waved the slip of paper in front of Gideon's nose. "Now listen to me, George. Here is a list of the boys who've been burned. They can't work, understand? One might have been an accident, but nine makes a campaign, and there may be more to come. So as soon as I heard there were several of them I checked round with the provincial cities. You want to know something?"

"Try me."

"Jack Gorra's boys left Glasgow last night and this morning. Some by train, some by road. And remember, Klein was up there with Gorra and they behaved like dear old pals. You can take it from me, the Glasgow Blacks are coming to take over from Sonnley, and all we've got to do is pick 'em up as they arrive, and have 'em sent back to Glasgow.

"Now wait a minute, wait a minute!" pleaded Lemaitre, as Gideon tried to get a word in. "I've telephoned Glasgow. They've put out an official request for all of Gorra's gang to be sent back for questioning. It's only a matter of putting our hand on them. They won't be likely to come by road, not all the way, it's a hell of a drive. I think those who started out by road will catch a train farther south, maybe in Carlisle, and we ought to be able to pick them up at Euston."

"Get the stations watched," ordered Gideon.

"Attaboy," said Lemaitre, and his grin seemed to split his face in two. "Action, that's me. We got seven of the so-and-so's off the Flying Scot, and nine more at the Bus Station. Don't they hate London!"

Gideon joined in his laugh, and felt a deep satisfaction.

His hands bandaged and free from pain, Sonnley was sitting at the window of his apartment, staring down into the street. Now and again he muttered harshly:

"I'll get the swine. I'll get him."

Soon afterward he went out by himself, to collect the tickets for the Procession stand. When he had them, he stepped into a telephone booth and, with great difficulty, in-

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serted the coppers and dialed the number where he expected to find Klein.

It rang on and on for a long time, while Sonnley scowled straight ahead at people passing in the street.

At last the ringing stopped, and Klein answered:

"Benny Klein speaking."

"Benny," Sonnley said in a low-pitched voice; he managed to make himself sound anxious.

"Who's that?" demanded Klein, and then caught his breath. "Is that you, Sonny Boy?"

"Listen, Benny," said Sonnley with soft urgency, "I know who fixed that acid now. It was that flicker from Glasgow, Jack Gorra. I can't do anything to Gorra yet, but the day will come. Listen, Benny—" he broke off.

"I'm listening," Klein said, as if he could not really believe that Sonnley was affable.

"I'm throwing my hand in," Sonnley declared. "I can't take any more of it, Benny. I'm past it. So I'm throwing my hand in, and I want to make sure the cops don't get anything on me over the grapevine. I want you to keep your mouth shut about me, Benny."

Klein asked swiftly, "What's it worth, Sonny Boy?"

That was the moment when Sonnley felt sure that Klein had taken the bait, and after a long pause he smiled for the first time since his fingers had been burned. Then he said as if anxiously:

"We agreed on five thou', didn't we?"

"*How* much, Sonny Boy?"

"Five thou'—"

"It's a deal for ten thousand," Klein said quickly. "Ten thousand will make a lot of difference to me, but a rich man like you won't notice it." There was a sneer in his voice.

Sonnley muttered, "I'm not so rich, but—well, I don't want trouble, Benny. I'll make it ten. But my hands are all burned. You'll have to collect the dough. You'll find it in the cellar at the Norvil Street shop."

"I've got some keys," Klein said. "Okay, Sonny Boy. You can sleep easy."

When he stepped out of the telephone booth Sonnley stood for a moment, wiping his forehead with the back of one bandaged hand. Then he turned toward his home.

His lips puckered as he began to whistle.

"Got a squeal on the blower, went along to Benny Klein's place, and caught him with ten thousand quids' worth of slush," Lemaitre reported to Gideon in great high spirits. "Klein swore that he'd picked it up on Sonnley's orders, but there isn't a way of proving it, and only Klein's dabs are on the money. Looks to me as if Sonnley found a way of dealing with a rat."

"All right, so we've got Klein," Gideon said. "But we haven't the engraver and printer who can turn

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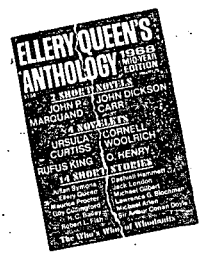
out this kind of stuff—it's nearly perfect."

He held one of the pound notes up to the light from the window, where the "water mark" showed. "Work on Klein, work on Sonnley, work on anyone who might be able to help us put a finger on that engraver. Make it your first job when the Visit's over."

"Okay, George," Lemaitre said.

He went out, leaving Gideon at his desk, with a pile of reports about the Visit in front of him, and with a deep awareness that the war against crime kept up. There was never any rest; there never would be.

His eyes brightened at the thought that Klein was going to get a longer rest than he'd bargained for.



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an unusual *NOVELET* of court-martial and detection by

JOHN and WARD HAWKINS

Second Lieutenant Peter Cameron had been assigned the duty of defense counsel in behalf of Private Alan Pomeroy who was facing a general court-martial on the charge of first-degree murder. As a lawyer, Pete Cameron was only a beginner—and despite the uniform he wore, he certainly wasn't much of a soldier. He had not yet submitted to Army discipline, had not yet admitted the Army's right to punish. But as a civilian, Pete Cameron possessed courage far above and beyond the call of duty; as a civilian, he could—with full knowledge of what he was doing—put his head in the mouth of an Army cannon . . . a loaded Army cannon!

This courtroom murder case at Camp Clements will grip your interest and, before it is finished, bring a lump to your throat. Superior entertainment!

SHADOW OF THE NOOSE

by JOHN and WARD HAWKINS

KING CITY'S HOTEL MARION OFfered the only air-conditioned dining room within 30 miles of Camp Clements. All military personnel eating there received exactly the same service. The hotel manager was a man who refused to believe high rank rated special privileges. Possibly because he'd been a buck private in World War II.

In his dining room a second lieutenant could seat himself at a table with a commanding general. He could, that is, if he was so foolhardy or so driven by necessity that he'd risk spending the rest of his Army career counting paper clips in some remote polar region. Commanding generals dislike people who take advantage of them, and the hotel manager's protection could extend only as far as the door.

Knowing all this, 2nd Lt. Pete Cameron entered the dining room. He found Maj. Gen. Daniel B. Sisson, commanding general of Camp Clements, alone at a table, went to that table, saluted, and took the chair opposite. After unfolding his napkin with hands that shook only

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a little, he met the general's blunt stare.

Dear Anne: It was like looking down the barrel of a loaded mortar. Sitting there, I was a guy waiting to get my head blown off. Let's face it, your husband's not real bright. Only a complete idiot would indulge in such utter folly. I told myself that, and did it anyway.

"Good evening, sir," Pete said.

The general said nothing. He looked at 2nd Lt. Peter Cameron steadily for perhaps a moment. Then he looked at the dozen empty tables in the room.

"I prefer to eat alone, Lieutenant."

"I know that, sir," Pete said.

Rank was not the only difference between the two men. The general was in his fifties, stocky, thick-shouldered, erect. His face was disciplined, square, and weathered. He had short gray hair and cold gray eyes. His mouth was a flat, inflexible line. He was as military as an M-1 rifle.

Pete Cameron was 26. He had quiet brown eyes, rather long lashes, and hair that was thick, dark, and unruly. His shoulders were slightly rounded and he was a few pounds too heavy for his five feet nine. His was a shape no uniform would ever fit with precision. No amount of training or trying would ever give him the bearing, the quick snap and hard polish of the truly military. He was obviously new to the Army and, to the general's eye, barely a soldier.

"Have you been drinking?" the general asked.

"I've had one drink, sir," Pete said. "Just one."

"Yet you want to eat at my table?"

"Not particularly, sir," Pete said. "To tell the truth, I'm so nervous I doubt if I could swallow."

"Then why are you here?"

"To talk to you, sir," Pete moved silverware, his hands plainly shaking now. "Don't think it's a spur-of-the-moment notion, sir. I saw you come in ten minutes ago. I've been in the bar arguing with myself ever since." He looked at the general. "It was an argument I lost."

The general continued his cold inspection. He saw a young second lieutenant not yet able to wear a uniform properly. It didn't matter that he was nervous, that a desperate sincerity looked out of his eyes. The general was concerned with a greater issue.

Army methods have been developed by centuries of warfare. Conformity to them is required. Without conformity there can be no order or discipline. "You're familiar with military channels?" the general said.

"I am, sir."

And he was. You can't see anyone in the Army officially, without the permission of the next man up

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the chain of command. Between a second lieutenant and a commanding general stood a forest of officers who could ask why, who could make you wait, who could say no.

A good thing, channels. Pete didn't doubt it. But sometimes difficult to negotiate. For Pete they had been impossible.

The general said, "You prefer not to use channels?"

"There isn't time, sir. A man's life is at stake."

"Whose life, Lieutenant?"

"Private Alan Pomeroy's sir."

"And you are?"

"His defense counsel, sir. Second Lieutenant Peter—"

"—Cameron," the general said.

And, crisply, he highlighted 2nd Lt. Peter Cameron's biography. Date and place of birth. Education. Four years at a state university. Law school. Pete had graduated with honors, passed the state bar, had been admitted to practice in a Federal court. Then active duty. The date of his commission. Training and place of training. Date of his arrival at Camp Clements, a casual officer waiting shipment overseas. Pete must have listened open-mouthed.

"Are you surprised?" the general asked. "This is my command. You're acting as defense counsel for a man facing a general court-martial, charged with first-degree murder. You have been certified as competent by the Judge Advocate General, but, did you think *I* would not look into your qualifications?"

"It isn't that, sir." Pete said it humbly because he felt humble. "It's the way you had it at your fingertips."

A waitress came with a laden tray. She looked at Pete. He shook his head. While the waitress served the general, Pete had time to wonder again at a system that would appoint a lawyer who'd practiced just five months as defense counsel for a man accused of first-degree murder. Not that he was in any doubt as to how it had happened.

Personnel had gone to the files. The best qualified officers had been assigned the duty. Second Lt. Pete Cameron, defense counsel, 1st Lt. Hugh Bevins, assistant defense counsel. Hardly a championship team. Pete's experience included little trial work, Bevins had left law school for military service.

Pete's first reaction had been mental mutiny. He had a reverence for "due process of law" that was almost holy. Right of adequate defense, a fair and impartial trial—cornerstones in his book. And what had Pomeroy been given? Cameron and Bevins for the defense—a beginner and something less. Not a trial by jury, a general court-martial. In the Army a man accused of murder stood for judgment before men who'd probably never cracked a lawbook.

"Well, Lieutenant?" the general said.

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"I'm sorry, sir. I was—trying to get my facts straight. I stuck my neck out when I sat down here. If I want to get it back with a head on it, I'd better be good. Real good."

"That is correct, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." Pete wiped sweat from his hands and stepped off the deep end. "As Pomeroy's defense counsel, I was instructed to do what amounted to everything humanly possible to win an acquittal. I took those instructions seriously and literally. Talking to you here is military folly. But it is humanly possible. I had to do it, sir, or fail in my duty."

"Why?"

"You're my last resort, sir. And Pomeroy's. His trial will end tomorrow. I've done all I can to prolong it, hoping the truth would come to light. Colonel McVey is fed up with my stalling. The trial will end, a verdict of guilty will be returned, Pomeroy will be sentenced to hang." Pete wet his lips. "And Pomeroy is an innocent man, sir."

"Can you prove that, Lieutenant?"

"That's what I'm up against." Pete's hands had suddenly become fists. "Can I prove he's innocent? General, the burden of proof to establish the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt is on the Government."

The general's voice was soft. "Lieutenant, your statement contains several grave implications. We'll attend to them in order. First you'll tell me why you believe Pomeroy is innocent." He paused. "Walk carefully, Lieutenant."

Pete Cameron understood the quiet warning, but he could not turn back.

"I've talked to Pomeroy at length," he said. "I know he's innocent, with my heart and my head, the way I know the sun will come up tomorrow."

"The charges against him were investigated by an officer appointed by me. The staff judge advocate recommended trial by a general court." The general paused, his stare level. "Are you accusing them of poor judgment or of being delinquent in their duty? Watch your answer, Lieutenant."

"The first, sir."

Another moment of staring. "I'll accept that," the general said finally. "We'll go on. The case against Pomeroy is based largely upon the testimony of two men—Sergeant Kennedy and Corporal Wirth, both of the military police, the arresting officers. When you say Pomeroy is innocent you accuse these men. Of what, Lieutenant? Poor judgment or perjury?"

Pete set his jaws. "Perjury, sir."

"On what grounds?"

"They swear they saw Pomeroy and Shirley Dolan together before the murder. Identification positive. They swear they saw them enter the woods in the park together. Identification positive. They swear they saw Pomeroy leave the woods

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alone a few moments later. Again, identification positive. Since all men in uniform look somewhat alike, this much might be an honest mistake, stubbornly defended. But some of the rest is perjury."

"I'll hear the rest."

"Kennedy and Wirth went into the woods," Pete said. "They found Shirley dead, her neck broken by a hard blow on the jaw, her clothing rumpled. This is true. But when they swear Pomeroy's clothes were torn, his face scratched and his knuckles bruised at the time of the arrest, they're lying, sir. Kennedy and Wirth caught Pomeroy on the walk and beat him up. His scratched face and bruised knuckles came from that, and not from a struggle with the girl."

"What is Pomeroy's story?"

"He admits he knew the girl," Pete said. "Nothing else. She was a civilian clerk-typist in the Quartermaster depot. Pomeroy had temporary duty in the depot as a freight handler. He saw her many times, but never dated her. On the night of the murder he was walking in the park alone. Alone, sir. The first he knew of the murder was when Kennedy and Wirth accused him and beat him."

"And you believe Pomeroy?"

"Implicitly, sir."

"The investigating officer and the staff judge advocate found no cause to doubt the testimony of Kennedy with Wirth. Again, indirectly, you accuse them of poor judgment or of being delinquent in their duty. Which is it, Lieutenant?"

"The first, sir."

"A wise choice."

Pete had a brief mental picture of Major Porter, the investigating officer, big-jawed, big-chested, dark-browed; and of the staff judge advocate, Colonel Lewellen, tall, thin-faced, bleak—two very rough men. They weren't going to like any sort of accusation. When word of this got to them, they would take steps.

"Now," the general's voice was still soft. "A moment ago you said, 'Can I prove he's innocent?' From this I assume you feel you're being required to show proof of innocence at the trial, rather than the Government establishing proof of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt."

"That's right, sir."

"Which would constitute an unfair trial," the general said slowly, "and accuse the members of the Court of being delinquent in their duties. Well, Lieutenant?"

Pete opened his sweating hands. He decided he hadn't been in the Army long enough. He wore a uniform, but he hadn't become a soldier. He hadn't submitted to Army discipline, hadn't admitted the Army's right to punish. In spite of the uniform, he'd come to the general's table acting like a civilian, thinking like one. A civilian, he thought, who'd put his head in the mouth of an Army cannon. A loaded cannon.

"I'll go the whole way, sir," he

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said. "Not that there's much further to go. I guess I've had it. But there is still Pomeroy." He looked fully at the general. "Sir, Pomeroy is not getting a fair and impartial trial."

"You say this out of your wide experience?"

Pete knew he was being given all the rope he could possibly use to hang himself.

"I won't say the members of the Court are delinquent," he said. "I do say they're not qualified to sit in judgment of a man on trial for his life. Except for the law officer, they don't know law. They're professional soldiers, not lawyers, not judges. Laymen. They don't know that the first principle of true justice is to judge with a fair and open mind. A mind without prejudicial opinion. They tried Pomeroy in their minds before the trial. They found him guilty."

"How do you know that, Lieutenant?"

"I can feel it!" Pete said. "I can see it! They heard the prosecution with some interest. With the defense they're bored. It's hot in the court, so they doze. They're impatient that I don't end the trail. The trial is over in their minds, the verdict is guilty. I'm wasting their time. And it's not because they're delinquent. It's because they don't know how to sit in judgment. They haven't been trained for it!"

"I approved the selection of the Court," the general said. "All officers—since the defendant did not request that an enlisted man serve as a member. They are as capable as any who have ever served at a general court-martial, anywhere. A criticism of them is a criticism of all military trials. Will you go *that* far, Lieutenant?"

"You're crowding me, sir."

"A military trial is the final product of military law. If the final product is at fault, so must the system be that produced it. Do you feel that the entire system of military law fails in its purpose?"

"If the case of Pomeroy is a sample, I do."

"His case is typical."

"Then I am forced to conclude there is no possibility of justice under military law, sir. No man accused—guilty or not—can hope for fair treatment or a fair trial."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," the general said. "You may go."

Pete Cameron felt as if the floor had been jerked from under him. He'd been prepared for anything but cold dismissal.

"But, sir!"

"We've gone from Pomeroy to a consideration of the entire system of military law," the general said. "I have your opinions on each point. That should suffice, Lieutenant."

"Sir, what are you going to do?"

The general's quiet voice was edged. "I'm going to dictate a full account of this conversation. A copy will be sent to every man concerned. A copy will also be sent to your commanding officer, with my rec-

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ommendation that proper disciplinary action be taken against you."

"That doesn't matter, sir." Pete's voice was hoarse. "It's Pomeroy. That man's life is—"

"Attention!"

Pete stiffened in his chair. "Sir, I —"

"I'll have you on your feet at attention!"

Pete came to his feet and came to attention. Rigid and silent, eyes fixed on nothing. It was forever before he heard a curt, "Dismissed!"

There was no argument left in Pete. He executed a staggering right face and stumbled down the corridor to the bar. The bar was crowded with men in uniform. He didn't notice their stares or realize a stool was vacated so he could have a seat at the bar. Presently a tall glass was set before him.

"On me," the bartender said. "The major, here, bets me you fall on your face before old Cut-Throat lets you go."

"Thanks," Pete said. "I can use this."

The talk picked up along the bar. A second lieutenant in a hassle with the commanding general—every soldier in the crowded hotel had stopped to look and listen. Opinions of Pete varied. He heard several.

"Medal of Honor," a slightly skished captain said. "Hang it on him for courage above and beyond the call of duty. Then shoot him."

"You know what they'll do?" a private said. "They'll give him one of them big deals like you see in the movies. Everybody on the parade ground. Drums rolling. The lieutenant stands at attention. Somebody strips his uniform—bars, buttons, shoulder straps. Then out he goes, all by himself, out the gate, into the sunset." The private had a drink. "Yes, sir. Always wanted to see one of those. Should be real gay."

Pete thought he would go along with the private. The big deal, at least, and a real gay time.

Dear Anne: I'm sorry to report that your soldier went to battle against superior forces. He overextended himself; he was enveloped. Somebody should have told your guy a general doesn't get to be a general because he's got a head full of rocks. This one's got a mind like a bear trap . . .

Like many another married man in the Army, Pete felt himself to be only half of the whole, responsible to the other half for all his actions, owing her a full account of each day's work, good or bad. It had become habit to think of events in letter form, making a mental file until he found time to write. Until now, his letters had been filled with cheer and accomplishment. This one, he thought, would read like doom.

It appears the best I can hope for is a request for my resignation for the good of the service. Conduct

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unbecoming an officer, insubordination—they've got a dozen to pick from.

Now her face appeared before him. He was glad to see her. A lovely girl, only 21, but a full and understanding woman. Light brown hair, dark brown eyes, a warm mouth. She had a smile for him. She always had a smile for him. Even on the day he'd told her he'd asked for active duty she'd smiled. Never mind that there'd been a shine of tears in her eyes.

"You feel you should," she said. "And I'm not surprised you feel that way. You come from a family with a military tradition."

That tradition. The Cameron blood held a strain of Indian—Sioux Indian, the family said. When he'd told Anne about it, Pete had spoofed her with a tale about a great-uncle of his who'd had his horse shot from under him by General Custer at the battle of Little Big Horn in '76. Fella named something Beaver, he'd said. A junior-type chief in Sitting Bull's army.

The story might have been true—no one could prove it wasn't—but true or not, it'd turned out to be a happy contrivance.

A pair of people losing a year-old home needed a bumper to hold away the hurt. Pete's distant uncle was all Anne's zany imagination needed. Over wine and spaghetti one night, she'd given the uncle a name. Chief Happy Beaver. And a description—a little on the tubby side, sort of shapeless, his eagle feather always askew, his breechclout always slipping.

"Sounds like me," Pete said.

She laughed, "Well, what d'you know?"

They'd really bounced it then. Happy Beaver was no sharp soldier. An earnest, eager sort of guy, always trying, never doing anything quite right. A sad-sack redskin, Uncle Happy Beaver, second-lieutenant type.

"Buy you another?" the bartender said.

"Thanks, no," Pete said. "One's my limit."

The stockade was set in a floodlighted area about a mile from the main gate. Pete Cameron nosed his jeep against a whitewashed rail and cut the switch. He crossed the parking lot to the orderly room. A Pfc sat at a desk inside the door. Sgt. Clifford Kennedy was standing on a chair, adjusting the sweep of an electric fan.

"Lieutenant," he said. "Hot enough for you?"

This one had walked out of a recruiting poster—flat belly, big shoulders, and brown hide. Golden fuzz on the backs of his hands, blue eyes and close-cropped hair. And very GI—glittering shoes, gleaming brass, and a belt trimmed to exactly the proper length. His hard-pressed suntans had been tailored to fit only a little more loosely than his skin.

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"I guess you want to see your boy," he said.

"Yes," Pete said. "And I'll have a 'sir' from you."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant!"

There was not quite derision in Kennedy's voice. But neither was there fear or true respect. Kennedy was an old soldier. He knew how far he could go in the baiting of a green officer; he went exactly that far.

And Pete was green. More than that, Pete was trying to prove in court that Kennedy was a liar—knocking himself out, Kennedy's bold eyes said, against a better man.

"Take you in myself," he said. "Sir."

They went past armed guards—maximum security, two keys for every door—and into the stockade proper. Kennedy's voice held a needle.

"Goin' to put me on the stand tomorrow, Lieutenant, sir?" he asked. "Goin' to give me another rough time?" And his tone said that nothing Pete could do would bother him.

"You'll see tomorrow," Pete said.

He set his jaws against anger. He was not going to let Kennedy provoke him. But he wondered what a man like this thought about in the dark hours of the night. He was trying to lie a man to the gallows—did it worry him?

Probably not, Pete decided. Kennedy had the tender conscience of a snake.

They entered a building that stood alone in the center of the stockade, bathed in glaring light. Pvt. Alan Pomeroy's cell was fashioned of heavy steel mesh, a metal box set within a wooden box. The mesh walls made it easy for the guards; they could watch the prisoner without moving from their chairs.

Pomeroy was lying on a rumpled cot, his hands beneath his head. He sat up when he heard the key rattle in the lock.

"Tell the guard when you want out—sir," the sergeant said.

"All right, Sergeant," Pete said.

Pomeroy stared at Pete. "What're you doin' here?"

"I came to talk to you, Alan."

"Ain't that nice?" Pomeroy said. "Grab a chair by the TV set. I'll have the missus bring you a beer."

He was a twenty-year-old, out of the slums of a seaport city. He wore fatigue pants and wooden shower clogs. He had dark hair, a sweat-oiled olive skin, and dark, angry eyes. He'd fought as a welterweight and looked it—tough face, bent nose, scar tissue swelling his brows.

Pete could have wished for a defendant a little less rugged, a little less male. This one looked like a man who could kill a girl as Shirley Dolan had been killed. But appearance does not make a killer.

Pete leaned against the cage wall. "I stuck my chin out today. Yours too. Maybe I did some good, maybe not."

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"So what's the scoop?"

Pete told him exactly what had happened at the general's table. When he had finished, Pomeroy's mouth was hard, flat.

"Why the hell'd you do such a thing?"

Pete said, "I hoped it would help."

"I could 'a' told you better." Pomeroy was on his feet, his naked chest close to Pete's shirt. "If you thought a stinkin' second looey could jaw at a two-star general, you're the world's biggest chump. To that guy you're the same kind of dirt I am to you."

"You're wrong, Alan."

"Wrong, am I?" Pomeroy's mouth twisted. "They got me measured for a rope, ain't they? What'd I do? Nothin'. Not a thing. But I'm a lousy buck private, see. I'm dirt. What's a buck private in this man's army? Hell, y'can always draft another one."

Pete said, "Listen to me, Alan."

"When I come into the Army they give me the big pitch," Pomeroy said. "It's goin' to be tough, sure. But one thing I can depend on is Army law—everybody gets a fair shake. What a joke!"

His laugh was ugly. "I'm in the park, waitin' for my missus to get off work. Doin' nothin', hurtin' nobody. Next thing I know, a couple of MP's jump out of the brush and beat the livin' hell out of me. Did I kill anybody?"

"I know you didn't."

"Who else knows? Them fat-headed judges? You're nuts if you think so. The sergeant and the corporal say I killed the babe, an' they got stripes. Army law—bull!"

"The trial isn't over yet, Alan."

"So what're you goin' to do tomorrow?"

Pete rubbed a hand over his tired, sweating face. "I don't know if I'll be there, Alan. I'm not even sure the trial will go on. I hope not. I hope I've set wheels turning that will get you a mistrial. Any kind of a delay will help." He met Pomeroy's eyes. "Whatever happens, I'll do my best."

"Then I'm for the rope!" Pomeroy pivoted away.

Pete stood looking at the oiled, muscled back. He was sick at heart. What could he say? A raw deal was a raw deal.

"Do me a favor," Pomeroy said. "Go into town and see my missus. Get her braced for what they're goin' to hand me tomorrow. Then give her the dope y' gave me—this trial ain't the end of it; it gets reviewed all the way to the President. Lay it on thick. Let her think I'm a sure winner the next round. Will you do that for me?"

"I'll do it."

Pete called the guard. He was outside the cage when Pomeroy came to the wire, hooked his fingers there. Pomeroy had a hard grin for Pete.

"Don't let it get you," he said. "You can't win 'em all."

There was a foul-up at the main

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gate. Civilian and military vehicles, outbound, were piled up in three long lines. Pete, heading for King City, found himself inching along behind a weapons carrier. He could see flashlights and white helmets up ahead—teams of MP's giving each outbound vehicle a fast and thorough shakedown.

"What's the trouble?" Pete asked.

"More stuff missing from Quartermaster depot," an MP told him. "Oil this time. Tires, sugar, butter—all the time something. Beats the hell outa me where it gets to. Ain't comin' through here, I'll tell you that!"

"But they chew you just the same?"

"They do that, sir. They really do."

The Eat-Rite's neon sign went out as Pete reached the door. The proprietor, a fat man in sweat-soaked white, let Pete in and then pulled down the blinds. The place wasn't much—a counter, a dozen tables, a row of booths.

"In the kitchen," the proprietor said.

She was sitting at a bone-white work table, a mug of coffee in her hand. The coffee was cold.

"Hello, Jenny," Pete said.

Jenny Pomeroy was a good-looking kid, but just a kid. Maybe 18, but not a day older. A tired 18.

"How—how is he?" she asked.

"I don't have to tell you," Pete said. "You know him."

She nodded a weary head. "Yes, I know him. I know how he is out there in jail. He's mean. Dirty mean and swearing. He gets that way when somebody picks on him. And when he's scared. But he's not like that, really. Not inside."

"I know that, Jenny."

"He's a softie, mister." She looked at Pete, her small chin quivering. "He'd give you the shirt off his back."

"Yes, Jenny."

"He made good money, fightin'," she said. "Where is it? Gone; but we didn't spend it. Anybody sick, anybody out of a job—go see Pommie. Anybody that knows him'll tell you. Ask 'em."

"I don't have to."

"How can they say he killed her? Pommie was a fighter, mister. He earned us a living, fighting. He knows what can happen when you hit somebody. Pommie hit a girl? He'd cut his hand off first. Ask anybody."

"He didn't kill her, Jenny."

"Those MP's say he did. They're lyin', mister. That's the last thing a guy like Pommie would do." Her eyes came up. "Why are they lyin', mister?"

"I wish I knew," Pete said.

"Nobody tells a lie for fun," she said. "Even a little lie; a person's got a reason for tellin' it. Sayin' Pommie killed somebody when he didn't, that's a big lie an' needs a big reason. Like what? Pommie never done anything to those guys; he hardly even knew 'em."

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She shook her head, her voice fading. "Why would they lie like that about somebody they hardly know?"

"I can't answer that," Pete said. "Jenny, listen to me. A conviction in this trial isn't the end. It will be reviewed. You mustn't give up hope. In the Army a case like his can go clear to the top. To the President. It's every soldier's right. And it doesn't cost him a cent."

"Y'know something, mister?" She was staring at the table. "Pommie was real proud to be a soldier. Best Army in the world, he said. Sometimes I wondered if he loved the Army more'n he did me, the way he talked. I'll bet they never get a guy that tries harder. So look what the Army did to him. How about that, mister?"

"Jenny," Pete said, "it isn't finished."

Her head sank to crossed forearms. Her small shoulders sagged, her voice was an empty whisper. "You can give that to the birds, mister."

Dear Anne: Did you ever want to turn in your membership in the human race? Did you ever ever feel so ashamed you wanted to find a place where no one would know you'd ever been a human being, capable of lies and cruelty and giving pain? I did. I have in my mind a picture of a small girl in an outsized uniform that will live with me forever, forever.

There was a spill of light on the steps of the orderly room of the casual-officers company. First Sgt. Samuel Yarnall sat in that light, face to the cool wind, a cigarette in his hand. He was a tall, lean, redheaded man, fifteen years in the service, 32 years old. He had big hands, big feet, big ears. A first sergeant of a company of officers needs special abilities—strength, quiet authority, tact. Yarnall had them all.

He watched Pete Cameron walk out of the night into the company area. His voice was quiet, chiding, "Chin up, Lieutenant. Shoulders back."

"Hello, Sergeant," Pete said. "I'm a lousy soldier."

"From what I hear," Yarnall said, "you been a bad boy."

"Word gets around fast."

"Gets to me, anyway. My big ears, I guess. Ain't much happens on this post I don't hear about." He made room on the steps. "Rest your feet, Lieutenant. Have a smoke."

"Am I in the doghouse?"

"No orders, if that's what you mean."

"What do I do tomorrow?"

"In the Army you follow the last order till you get the next one. Soon as I get the order to put you under barracks arrest, I'll let you know. Meantime, you keep goin' like nothing happened."

"Arrest," Pete said. "Sounds rough."

They talked about Pete's meeting with the general, the why of it, the

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result of it. Yarnall made a few pointed remarks about the military future of a man whose head held chowder instead of brains. Grim, he said.

They talked about the trial, the members of the court, Kennedy, Wirth, Pomeroy and Jenny. Yarnall had one firm opinion.

"Colonel McVey's a lot of soldier," he said. "I served under him once. He'll do, Lieutenant."

"Granted he's a good soldier," Pete said. "He's still got no business presiding at a general court-martial. Not trained for it." He snapped his cigarette away. "Kennedy and Wirth are lying. Since I'm the only man who believes that, it's up to me to prove it. And I've got an idea—about as wild as an idea can get. See what you think, Sergeant. If it makes sense, maybe you can give me a hand."

"Shoot, Lieutenant," Yarnall said. And when he'd heard Pete out, he nodded a sober head. "Could be," he said. "There's hardly anything that can't be, in the Army."

"Will you give it a whirl?"

"Why not?" He flipped the gold bar on Pete's shirt collar. "My stripes don't mean a bit more to me than that bar does to you," he said. "I been a buck private three times."

The sun came up the next morning the same as any other day. Pete and 1st Lt. Hugh Bevins, the assistant defense counsel, went to the mess hall. Hugh Bevins was a fair-haired lad, tall, good-looking, easy-going. He was two years older than Pete, an apple polisher by his own cheerful admission. Very little help, but a good guy.

Pete looked in at the orderly room on the way back from mess. Sergeant Yarnall lifted his shoulders—no orders yet.

"Still early," Bevins said. "Got to pick the firing squad. Got to issue rifles and ammunition. Takes time."

They went back to their quarters. Bevins stretched himself comfortably on his bunk. Pete paced and smoked. His eyes kept straying to the P.A. box on the wall. The call would come over that. "Lieutenant Cameron, report to—"

"What you'll hear," Bevins said, "is the tramp of boots. Fall out, Lieutenant! Fall in! Hup, hup, hup . . . halt! Bandage? Cigarette? I hope you'll face the end with courage, m'boy."

"Keep it up," Pete said, "you'll get a fat lip."

"Would you strike a superior officer?"

"Yeah," Peter said. "If he's a guy I can lick."

A little before nine they did hear the tramp of boots, one pair. It was the motor-pool corporal, bringing the key to the jeep.

"I get the picture now." Bevins said. "and it's better this way. More dramatic. They're going to shoot you on the court house steps."

"Okay." Pete said. "Then I'll know."

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But there was no firing squad waiting at the barracks where the general Court was sitting. The trial was going on—prejudiced or not; the general hadn't turned a hand. Pete parked the jeep.

"How about this?" he said.

"Rough." Bevins' voice was sober now. "You got out of line, and for that you should lose your head. But I'd have sworn you'd get the kid a new trial. Even a whisper of prejudice should be enough for that."

"Not in the Army," Pete said.

The courtroom was plain. Scrubbed floors unfinished walls, bare windows. The bench was at the far end of the room. Desks for the prosecution and defense were near the walls. The Court stenographer and law officer each had a desk and chair.

The witness stand was a plain oak chair. Three rows of benches had been placed well back for spectators.

The trial counsel—the prosecutor—and his assistant were at their table—Capt. Frank Tingley and 1st Lt. Eric Speer, both serious and capable. They nodded at Pete and Bevins. If they'd heard of Pete's talk with the general, they kept it from their faces.

The court reporter, Pfc. Paul Vanderhoof, came over to talk to Pete. Vanderhoof was a twenty-year-old with thick glasses and a shy grin. Another of Personnel's best-availables, his shorthand speed was a bare sixty words a minute. He wanted Pete to check a couple of points in his transcription of yesterday's notes.

"Will you take it slow today, sir?" Vanderhoof asked.

"I'll try," Pete said. "If I go too fast, sound off."

"Thanks, sir. I'm a real snafu, I guess."

"You're doing your best—that's all you can do."

Pomeroy was brought in between two guards. He slid into a chair beside Pete. He was neat in fresh suntans; his hair was wet from combing. Young, but all man, the best material for a soldier—strong and quick, born with a tough courage and a stubborn loyalty. But he was not a good soldier now. His dark face was ugly, his eyes were bitter.

"You look like the guy I had yesterday." His eyes went around the room. "Looks like the same trial too." His eyes came back to Pete. "How about that, baby? Maybe you was bullin' me about tellin' the general."

"I told you the truth," Peter said. "Nothing came of it."

Pomeroy's laugh was ugly. "You'n' me, a couple of punks. You don't rate in your league any better'n I do in mine. Who's gonna listen to us? A general? Nuts!"

"The trial's not over, Alan."

"The hell it ain't! It was over the day it started. That's the Army, Jack. So you're innocent and they're gonna hang you—take it up with your chaplain!"

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"Easy, Alan," Pete said. "Easy."

"Easy, he says," Pomeroy's voice was thick. "Relax, he says." He put a rough hand on Pete's arm. "I ain't gonna take it layin' down, see? Nobody hangs me without a fight!"

"Ten—hut!"

Pomeroy broke it off as the members of the Court and the law officer took their places at the bench. Lt. Col. Oliver McVey, President of the Court, sat in the center, a white-haired, thin-mouthed man, who wore thick-rimmed glasses. Maj. James Banzer, short, red-faced, and thick-necked, sat at his right. Capt. William Lawson, a mild, soft-voiced shadow, sat at his left. A second captain and three lieutenants filled the rest of the chairs. Seven career soldiers.

Pomeroy had been staring at the Court. Now he looked at Pete. "Do these guys know you blew your top to the general?"

"They should," Pete said.

"Great!" Pomeroy said harshly. "You told the general they're no stinkin' good. That ought to help me a lot, huh?"

Pete shook his head. "You know better, Alan."

"Sure." His hand closed hard on Pete's arm. "An' I know somethin' else. You got guts. Nobody makes you weasel—not me, not anybody. You do what you got to do and take your lumps. I'll go the road with a guy like you win or lose."

A gavel rapped. "The Court will come to order."

The room became still. Colonel McVey studied the papers before him, then removed his thick-rimmed glasses. He looked at everyone in the room; he looked at Pete last of all. His gaze was level and cold.

Yes, Pete decided, the colonel had heard from the general.

The law officer said quietly, "Proceed with the defense, Lieutenant."

A faint sigh went through the courtroom. They'd all been braced, Bevins more than any. Pete turned to him.

"Any suggestions?"

"Tuck in your tie," Bevins said. "Go with God."

Pete got to his feet. Now he was faced with it—the last battle. He couldn't prolong the trial another day; today he won or lost. And today he was empty-handed. Kennedy and Wirth were lying. To win an acquittal, Pete had to break their testimony.

How do you break a lie? How do you drag the truth out of clever men? With what weapons?

Pete wiped sweat from his hands and shook a sudden panic from his mind.

"Corporal Wirth," he said.

Wirth came in quickly, a sight to gladden the heart of any commanding officer. Suntans spotless, brass polished, shoes gleaming. He was lean and hard-bitten.

A trace of a smile pulled at his lips as he sat down. Then his expression changed and he became a

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man with an earnest desire to help, a soldier doing his duty—and a liar by the shine in his eyes.

"Do you know the penalty for perjury?" Pete asked.

"Dishonorable discharge, sir. Five years' imprisonment."

"Keep that in mind," Pete said.

He shaped his questions carefully, hunting for character flaws, weaknesses—anything at all that might be used to impeach Wirth's testimony. A tedious task, geared to Vanderhoof's painfully slow shorthand, blocked by a dozen sustained objections.

And a total waste. Wirth's answers showed him to be a good, clean, red-blooded American boy.

Pete examined Wirth's relationship to Kennedy. Were they friends? Close friends? No. Corporal and sergeant in the same MP company, that was all. Had Wirth known the deceased, Shirley Dolan, personally? Yes. Date her? No.

"Remember the penalty for perjury, Corporal," Pete said.

Wirth grinned. "Well, I tried to date her, sir. But she always said no. Is that better?"

Laughter in the courtroom. The gavel rapped.

Pete went on to the night of the murder. Wirth's duty, his reason for being with Kennedy, his identification of Pomeroy, before and after the crime, the arrest of Pomeroy, the condition of Pomeroy's face, knuckles and clothes—Pete went into each point minutely, and gained nothing. This was all old ground; Wirth's answers did not change.

It was hard grueling work for Pete, fun for Wirth. And boring for the members of the Court. A lieutenant sat with his chin on his fist—asleep, Pete was sure. Another stared at the ceiling. The others doodled or scowled at Pete. Colonel McVey alone followed the testimony with an alert eye.

Pete finally dismissed Corporal Wirth. A noon recess was called.

After lunch Pete called Sergeant Kennedy to the stand. He'd called Wirth first, feeling Wirth was the lesser man, the one more likely to break. Kennedy was a bull for strength, confident and clever.

When the course of Pete's questioning became clear—the same course he'd followed with Wirth—there was a rustle of real resentment in the room.

But Pete went stubbornly on. The stifling heat of the room, the impatience of the trial counsel, the incisive voice of the law officer, sustaining against him, warning him, blocking him, added to the anger swelling in his throat—anger born of frustration, of knowing he was losing a fight that should be won.

"Shirley Dolan was your girl, wasn't she?"

"No, sir," Sergeant Kennedy said.

"How often did you date her?"

"I dunno exactly. Maybe a dozen times."

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"Were you intimate with her?"

"No, sir. Just friends."

"Repeat that answer, Sergeant. I want no mistake."

"I object!"

The objection was sustained. This was old ground, the law officer said, already thoroughly explored and found barren. There was no reason, at this point, to defame or try to defame the good reputation of the deceased.

Sergeant Kennedy was staring at Pete, derision plain in his eyes. He had just lied again—his eyes admitted it. His eyes were defying Pete to prove the lie.

Pete's mind fogged with red anger. He faced the bench.

"If the Court please," he said hoarsely, "I'm here under orders to do everything humanly possible to free the defendant. An innocent man. I demand the right to follow orders. I demand the right to secure him justice!"

"Is he not getting justice?" the colonel asked.

"There is no justice here!" The words burst from Pete's lips; he could not call them back. "This is not a fair trial; this is a comedy of errors. The defendant was falsely accused. The witnesses against him are guilty of perjury. Corporal Wirth lied. Sergeant Kennedy is lying now!"

Pomeroy was suddenly on his feet, yelling, "Y'damn right he's lying! The dirty, rotten son—"

And the room exploded. Pomeroy's outburst startled the lieutenant whose chin had been propped on his fist, and his chair went over with a crash. The trial counsel was up, loudly protesting; Pomeroy tried to shout him down. The colonel's gavel pounded.

Vanderhoof's thin voice rose in a wailing plea, "Slow down! Slow down! I can't keep up!" And Pete Cameron stood stricken and stunned—he had touched it off.

Pomeroy went suddenly berserk. He leaped the defense table and charged Sergeant Kennedy like a thrown lance. Pete's wild grab missed.

Pomeroy hit Kennedy, shoulder to chest, and took him backward over the witness chair. There was murder in Pomeroy's curses, in his clutching hands. A dozen men leaped to break it up. The MP guards waded in, clubs high.

Pete closed his eyes to the thud of wood on bone and flesh.

Dear Anne: That wasn't an earthquake you heard, that was the end of the world—Happy Beaver's world, at least. Your man committed a lawyer's greatest sin; he lost control of himself. Bevins will tell you he made military history, the most infamous kind. I will tell you he failed in a sacred trust. The defendant did not go free from his trial—he was carried away unconscious.

Pete sat in the jeep, holding his

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head in his hands. He heard feet on the gravel of the parking area and someone got behind the wheel. It was Bevins, and his voice was tired.

"You're under arrest," he said. "In my custody."

"The trial?"

"Adjourned," Bevins said. "Don't ask me for how long. McVey's too wild-eyed to say. He's burning, Pete."

"Can't blame him. I disgraced the uniform."

"You're no hero, I'll give you that." Bevins got the jeep out of the parking area and on the road. "I hate to say it, Pete, but I think you're finished."

Pete nodded. "I'll lose my commission—for the good of the service. If the colonel wants to be rough about it, he can hit me with a court-martial."

"Could be," Bevins said.

They approached an intersection. A weapons carrier was parked on the far side of it, and the man at the wheel was Sergeant Yarnall. He waved them down and came over, tall, big-handed, lean. He carelessly tossed them a half salute, shoved his cap far back on red hair, and gave them an easy grin.

"Trial finished?"

"No," Bevins said. "Blown to hell."

He gave Yarnall the story. Yarnall listened, watching Pete's face with a look of wry bafflement.

"Lieutenant, whatever am I going to do with you?"

"We can always feed him to the squirrels," Bevins said.

"Yeah," Yarnall said. "Well, c'mon. I think I've got something that'll do a little good."

"He's under arrest."

"Sure," Yarnall said. "You've got to take him back to the barracks. Anybody say which road you had to take? So it goes through town, where's the beef?"

"That's an evasion," Bevins said. "It could cost me my commission. It would certainly block my promotion. I won't consider it." He looked at Yarnall. "Unless you've got something—say, as hot as a sheriff's pistol?"

"Could get our boy outta the grease."

Pete came erect. "Was I right?"

"Looks like," Yarnall said. "We'll know pretty quick."

Bevins said, "Give me some facts."

Yarnall looked long at Bevins. "It's a deal the lieutenant figured out. That's enough. It ain't good for an officer to know too much. Make's 'em responsible, see? Not knowing, you can always pass the buck. Am I right?"

"Depends on the size of the buck," Bevins said. "I got a hunch this is a big one." He got out of the jeep. "And I wanted to be a captain. You don't know how much I wanted to be a captain . . . C'mon, Pete. We can always join the Navy; they'll take anybody."

They got into the weapons car-

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rier. Yarnall drove. He kept looking at Pete, shaking his head in a kind of baffled wonderment. They were well on the way to town before he spoke.

"Dunno who trained you, Lieutenant," he said. "Whoever it was, done a lousy job. Me, I'd've hammered a couple of things in your head as soon's I taught you the hand salute. You can't soldier without 'em. It's a little late, but you might as well learn 'em.

"Number One: Don't buck the Army system! If it blocks you, outflank it. There's a way around everything and everybody. All you got to do is find it. Tear in, head on, with your neck bowed—right or wrong—and you'll end up busted. Every damn time. Y'got that?"

"The hard way," Pete said.

"Here's Number Two," Yarnall said. "In the Army, we got a deal called a 'strategic withdrawal.' You don't only use it in combat. You use it all the time. Whenever you find yourself up against superior forces, make a strategic withdrawal.

"It ain't a retreat, you ain't licked. You back up, you get more muscle, you tackle it again, maybe a different way—you're still alive, you're still in the fight, see? But stay in there, outmanned and outgunned, and there ain't nothing you can get but clobbered. You lose the fight every damn time!"

"I stayed in," Pete said. "I lost the fight."

"Now you got it," Yarnall said. "Hang onto it and maybe some day you'll learn to soldier."

He stopped at a service station, used a telephone, and got back behind the wheel. He finally stopped again on a little-used road on the outskirts of King City where there was only a scattering of houses. A block ahead of them was a long low building. There was no sign on it, but it looked like a warehouse. Yarnall said it was their objective.

"We're busting in," he said. "There's a door in the back, Lieutenant"—to Bevins—"cover it and grab anything that comes out. We'll hit it from the front. Look sharp and step lively. There'll be a tussle, maybe a gun or two. Okay?"

Bevins said, "Give me time to get there."

They gave him time. Then Pete and Yarnall left the weapons carrier. They turned down a driveway that ran the length of the building. There was a loading platform at the far end, a door halfway down. The door was closed. Yarnall broke into a trot.

"Hard and fast," he said.

He was at a full run when he reached the door. His hand flipped the knob, his shoulder hit the wood, and the door smashed open. He was through, still running, and Pete was only a stride behind.

They were in a rough sort of office, long and wide. There were chairs, a desk, a filing case, a stack

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of crates and boxes—and three men. A small one sat at the desk, a heavily built one stood in an inner doorway, a dark one used a chair. They were all civilians.

Yarnall picked the big one in the inner doorway, going for him without a pause. Startled or not, the big man knew a fight when he saw it, and met the lunge, driving forward with clubbing fists.

Pete took the tougher of the two who were left—the slender dark one, possibly a Mexican; going in with all he had, he swung a hard right, missed, and tangled with the man—tangled, he found, with barbed wire. Slender or not, the dark man had a lithe and vicious strength.

The man at the desk squealed. He was on his feet, short, plump, white-haired. The way to the outer door was blocked by Yarnall and the big man. He hopped away from the desk and vanished through the inner door. No way to stop him. Yarnall and Pete had all they could handle.

Yarnall's going was very rough. The big man was a powerhouse and he was thick-skulled. They were on the floor, a twisting, rolling scramble of arms and legs.

Pete almost lost an eye to the dark man's hooked, clawing fingers; he caught a driving knee on his hip; he jerked away from rigid fingers seeking his nostrils. A hard right found the dark, snarling face, high; a left missed.

They closed and tripped and fell. Pete couldn't hold the twisting, spitting, scratching devil. He squirmed from under Pete. When he got to his feet, he was in a spring-kneed crouch, an open switchblade knife in his hand.

The blade was death, and Pete knew it. It was held like a sword, belt high, arm coiled—held by a man who knew how to use it. And Pete was afraid.

He watched the knife like a bird watching a snake; he got to his feet. His hands were empty; there was no weapon near. And the dark man stalked him, slowly, on the balls of his feet, poised.

Pete backed away, his mind blind in that moment. The first strike came, a flashing cut from left to right. Pete jerked away. A white-hot iron crossed his chest.

It was only a light cut. It opened his shirt from pocket to pocket and let blood flow from a deep scratch. And it saved Pete's life. When he felt the blade, he lost his fear. He knew how to fight a knife. The Army had spent long hours teaching him.

When the blade came again—this time a rapier thrust—he was ready. He twisted around the knife, outside; his hands snapped down and closed on the knife hand, his thumbs to the back. He lifted the knife hand high, throwing it over, whipping it down. The dark man's arm snapped. He screamed like a child.

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Pete used his fists then, like hammers, mercilessly, and in a moment beat the man senseless. When he dropped, Pete turned quickly. Yarnall and the big man were still on the floor. Each had a pair of hands on the other's throat, Yarnall's inside, having a little the better of it.

Pete took a long stride and kicked the big man in the back of the head. No more was needed. Yarnall got up, swearing.

"I had the guy! Had him cold! I didn't need—" He stared at Pete's blood-soaked shirt, sobering instantly. "A shiv," he said. "You hurt?"

"A near miss," Pete said.

Yarnall had to see for himself. Then he looked at the knife, and at the dark man's twisted forearm. His eyes came back to Pete, a grin building in them.

"Kind of hell on wheels, ain't you?"

Pete felt eight feet tall.

And they heard the sound of far-off sirens. Yarnall swore. "The other guy—" He lunged for the inner doorway. Halfway through it, he saw Bevins coming down the dim interior of the warehouse with the third man. The plump little man was walking on tiptoes in front of Bevins, one arm out of sight behind him.

"Popped out the back," Bevins said. "Want him?"

"Yeah, man!" Yarnall said. "He's Number One." He caught the plump man by the coat front. "Watch the other two. What I got to do ain't a fit sight for officers and gentlemen."

He hustled the small man back into the warehouse. Pete heard Yarnall's voice snarling, as ugly as a voice could be. He heard the *Smack! Smack! Smack!* of a hard hand beating a face. The beating didn't stop until a thin voice moaned, then cried, then squealed for mercy.

The sirens whooped in the drive outside, then tires wailed and doors slammed.

Six men poured into the room, four in uniform, two not. Pete's heart dropped to his socks. The big man with the black brows and heavy jaw, wearing the oak leaf, was Hulshof, the provost marshal at Camp Clements—the boss MP. He had three noncom MP's with him. The civilians were city police.

Pete and Bevins snapped to attention. Hulshof's eyes were furious.

"Where's Yarnall?" he snapped.

Yarnall said, "Here, sir."

He came into the room, shoving the plump little man ahead of him. The round face was swollen, bruised, and streaked with tears. Yarnall held him by the back of the neck and gave Major Hulshof an easy grin.

"Like I told you on the phone sir," he said, "we had the range on a nest of thieves. Butterball, here"—he rattled the plump little man—"is the lad who's been buying the

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stuff we've been missing from the supply depot. Got a lot of it stacked out back. Now he's just beggin' for a chance to tell us who was the head thief of the bunch who stole it. Ain't that so, Butterball?"

"Yes—yes, I'll tell you."

"Give us the name, loud and clear."

"S-Sergeant Kennedy."

Dear Anne: Did you know enlisted men will tell a noncom they know and trust, things they'd never tell an officer? It's a fact. A pair of honest GI's in the Quartermaster depot knew a little and guessed more. It took a man like Yarnall to get it out of them.

And it blew the whistle on Kennedy. Wirth sang like a bird. Kennedy killed Shirley Dolan. Why? She was his girl, almost his wife, and she knew about his thieving. He tried to give her the brush for a girl he liked better, she threatened to talk, he slugged her—and that's the way a murder happens.

Major Hulshof isn't too happy with us. It seems he and his people were also investigating Kennedy and Wirth and we grabbed the brass ring one step ahead of them. I put together Kennedy's lie-without-reason and the theft of the supplies, and Yarnall did the rest. He gives me all the credit. He says I'll need it. In that he's right. Your Happy Beaver still has his misdeeds to account for—the Army exacts punishment for each crime.

The office of Maj. Gen. Daniel B. Sisson was large, but it was crowded the next morning. Colonel McVey and Major Hulshof were there. Yarnall was there. Pvt. Alan Pomeroy, his head a turban of bandages, stood between Pete Cameron and Hugh Bevins. The general sat at his desk, cold-eyed, implacable. Now he looked up from the papers he held in his hands.

"Private Pomeroy."

Alan Pomeroy stiffened. "Yes, sir?"

"You've been cleared of the charge of murder," the general said. "As recompense for being unjustly accused, I'm recommending a ten-day leave for you, to begin immediately. Upon your return to duty, you will answer for your conduct at your trial. The charges are: striking a noncommissioned officer, using foul language, brawling and disgracing yourself and the uniform. You will suffer such punishment as your commanding officer may deem just and advisable. Is that clear, private?"

"Yes—yes, sir."

"Then you may go."

Pomeroy stood fast.

"Well?" the general asked.

"I'd like to stay, sir," Pomeroy said. "I'd like to hear what kind of a deal Lieutenant Cameron gets, sir. I dunno; maybe I'll have to blow my top again."

"You think well of Lieutenant Cameron?"

"Do I!" Pomeroy said. "Look

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what he done for me! Saved my neck, didn't he? A lousy buck private. All he got out of it was grief. But he didn't quit. He—" Pomeroy took a deep breath. "Look, sir, he's the best damn officer in this man's Army—and that's from a guy that knows!"

"A high opinion"—the general's eyes remained cold—"not shared, unfortunately, by his superiors. Stay, then." He put Pomeroy's paper aside. After a moment he said, "Sergeant Kennedy, Corporal Wirth, and others will be charged with murder and other crimes and tried before a military court. Their treatment and punishment, if found guilty, will be in accordance with the military code."

His eyes leveled on Pete Cameron. "I'd like an opinion from you, Lieutenant. Would you say that Private Pomeroy received just treatment?"

"I would, sir."

"Under military law?"

"Yes, sir."

"How was that possible?"

"Sir, I—"

Pete set his jaws hard. This, he knew, was the moment for Yarnall's "strategic withdrawal." The general had opened the issue again—was justice possible under military law? Pete had said no before, and what had changed? Nothing basic. And when he looked at the avenues of withdrawal, he found them closed. A man named Pete Cameron blocked each way.

"It was possible, sir," he said, "because Sergeant Yarnall and I were able to prove Kennedy and Wirth were lying, which, in effect, proved the defendant innocent."

"That is correct," the general said.

He had the answer he'd wanted—the issue was still open. Nothing in his manner changed. His gray eyes were still impersonal and cold. He put the papers on his desk and crossed his hands.

"In fairness to the Court," he said, "I must tell you this. Colonel McVey, the presiding officer, came to me a full day before you did—a full day, Lieutenant—to say he felt there was a real possibility that Kennedy and Wirth were lying. Since a verdict of guilty would be based on their testimony, he suggested a thorough investigation of them be made. And since we hold a man is innocent of any crime—and perjury is a crime—innocent until proved guilty, we felt the trial must be continued and their testimony accepted as true and valid until we had evidence to the contrary." He paused for a moment. "Does this indicate to you that Colonel McVey was prejudiced against the defendant, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir." Pete faced the colonel. "My apologies, sir."

The colonel's head tipped in a cool nod.

"Major Hulshof," the general said, "made the investigation at my

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orders. Kennedy and Wirth serve in his command. He gave them the same scrutiny and treatment he would give to men in any other command. He reached the same conclusion you did, Lieutenant, and a little before. Unfortunately, however, his position does not permit him to use Sergeant Yarnall's method of extracting a confession. He was searching for a more legitimate means when you and the sergeant acted."

Pete was sweating now. Plainly, nothing he had done had been necessary. The Army working in its own fashion would have freed Pomeroy in a little more time. The Army methods, then, had proved fit and capable. And where did that leave Pete Cameron?

"I was wrong, sir," Pete said. "In the case of Pomeroy, the defendant was fully protected under military law."

"In the case of Pomeroy," the general said slowly. "Does that imply that you feel justice is not served in every case under military law, Lieutenant?"

"It does, sir," Pete said.

"And I agree," the general said. He paused, looking at Pete. A relentless man, a rifle of a man. In a moment he said, "Are you surprised that I agree, Lieutenant?"

"Yes—yes, sir," Pete said.

"And that," the general said, "implies you felt me to be a man with a closed mind—if not stupid, at least not intelligent. Because, Lieutenant, no responsible officer can deny our system has certain inherent weaknesses—lack of legal training in the members of the board, differences of rank, the requirements of military discipline, to name a few. I like to feel that I am a responsible officer. I resent even an implication that I'm not."

"Sir, I didn't mean—"

"Let me ask you this, Lieutenant," the general said. "If not our way, what alternative? Keep in mind that service in uniform is a unique way of life. Our problems are separate and distinct from those of civilian life, our needs are often peculiar to us alone. Would you suggest a civilian court be attached to every company—how many would we need? Would their lack of knowledge of our special requirements be less harmful than our lack of legal training? Would not just as many injustices be done?"

"Yes. I—I guess so, sir."

"I'll have a positive answer, Lieutenant."

"The answer is yes, sir."

"Should we recruit and train," the general asked, "enough graduate law students to serve our every need? One to each company would mean many thousands. Where would we find them? What schools would train them? And if we had them, would they be a practical addition to the services or would they be an overwhelming burden to us and to the taxpayer?"

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"It wouldn't make sense, sir."

"An alternative, Lieutenant. Offer one."

"I—I haven't any, sir."

"Nor does anyone else," the general said. "Poor as you may feel our system is, we have yet to find one that would serve our purposes with a fraction of our present efficiency. Do you agree?"

"I agree, sir."

"Good," the general said. "Military law has come a long way from the drumhead, Lieutenant. Changes are constantly made, methods are improved, new safeguards are developed. I am confident we will stay at least abreast of any other means of justice. Confident, because there are men like Colonel McVey—impartial, fair, and intelligent—on almost every board. And because there are men like you, Lieutenant, who will fight, if not with discretion, at least with every means available to protect the rights of a man who stands accused."

"Yes, sir," Pete said.

The general lifted his papers. "I've written a report on your conduct during this trial, Lieutenant. As you know, it will be attached to your record to follow you wherever you go while in the service. It reads, in part:

" 'This officer has shown himself to be emotionally immature. He gave himself to extreme anger. In times of stress his judgment was poor. He seemed unwilling to admit higher authority or to comply with regulations.' "

The general looked up. "There is also a list of specific charges to be acted upon by your commanding officer. Do you wish to protest?"

"No, sir."

Paper clips, Pete thought. *With a report like that on my record I'll be counting paper clips at the North Pole from now until the ice thaws. I've had it.*

"There are also," the general said, "certain recommendations. Again, in part: 'However, this officer has shown an integrity, a courage, a complete devotion to duty seldom equaled in my experience. I urge his immediate and rapid promotion.' "

Dear Anne: That's the Army—reward for service, punishment for disservice. Well, Happy Beaver's learning—learning it takes a long time to become a soldier. With luck, one day I'll get there.

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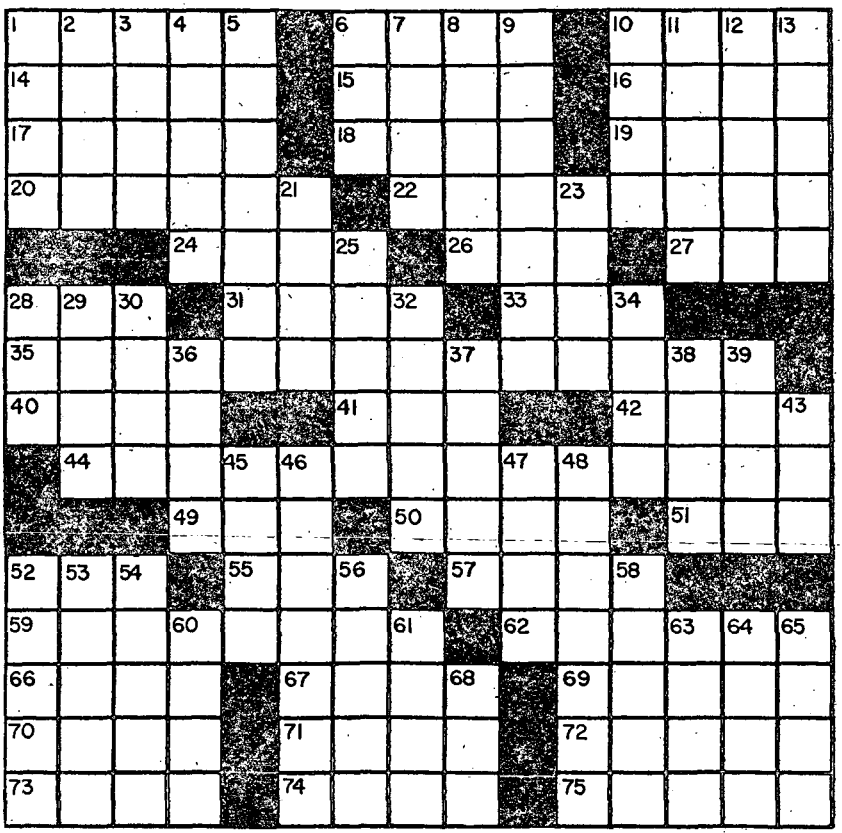
DOUBLE CROSS-WORD PUZZLE



by NORMA SCHEER

ACROSS

1 Cruder
6 Mark
10 Partner in crime—or in marriage
14 Girl's name
15 A capital city, to its inhabitants
16 First man
17 At the head of
18 Petty crook
19 Comb—or garden tool
20 Tips—or guides
22 Croupiers
24 Red and dead
26 Pronoun
27 Finale
28 Beginning of twentieth century
31 Without alteration
33 Half of a well-

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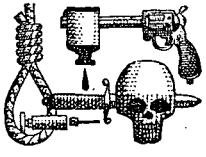
known author-editor team
35 Complained to 7 Down (2nd def.)
40 Eldest, French
41 By way of
42 Pro———
44 To report undercover to 7 Down (2nd def.)
49 Latin pronoun
50 Many a singing group
51 English rank, abbr.
52 Girl's name
55 Overhead—or acorn
57 Portico
59 A cheat with dice—or garage employee
62 Have the means
66 Con ———, musical dir.
67 Money
69 Organic chem. compound
70 Internal, comb. form
71 A canal in N.Y.
72 A musical form
73 Office equipment
74 Fingerprints—or strokes lightly
75 Thief—or pry

DOWN

1 Ball game officials, abbr.
2 Got down
3 Signal between gamblers—or a cable
4 Kinds of curves
5 Go back
6 Some college students, abbr.
7 Steals—or colloquial for certain civil forces
8 Friendship
9 Popular dish in 15 Across
10 A sucker—or a symbol
11 "There is nothing like ———"
12 Robbed—or obtained some other way
13 Change
21 Part of a window
23 Hints
25 Strainer
28 Degree in Bus. Ad.
29 Cheat—or fasten
30 Bill of fare
32 Fast
34 To be, French
36 Moistens
37 Split ones are finicky distinctions
38 To go on a spree—or a bird
39 English school
43 Insect
45 Fish
46 Pursued
47 Girl of Neapolitan song
48 Narcotic addicts
52 Implant
53 Early science fiction writer
54 Sulphuric and nitric
56 Ornamental coronet
58 River of Scotch song
60 Pickpocket—or catch a fish
61 Place to burgle—or infant bed
63 Words of protest
64 Redecorate
65 To assault—or fall
68 Ed. degrees, abbr.

(*Solution on page 95*)



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FAMOUS FIRST WORDS

AUTHOR'S PREFACE: *What were the first words spoken in print by some of the great fictional detectives?*

Naturally, some "entrance lines" are mere variations of "Hello, how are you?" or "I'm so-and-so." But other "first words" are more memorable, foreshadowing the vivid personalities that were to make their speakers "household names," if not immortal characters.

Each of the following speeches introduced a then-unknown detective to the world—a detective destined to become famous.

If you want to play this quiz as a game, credit yourself with 1 point for correctly identifying each detective's name, 1 more point if you know the title of the book or short story in which the detective first appeared, and a third point for the name of the author who created the detective.

If you score 20 points or more (out of a possible 27), you have the right to call yourself an expert or aficionado (and your Editors congratulate you). If you score 15 to 20 points, you have obviously spent a goodly amount of time in the company of the great gumshoes (and your Editors thank you). A score of 10 to 15 points shows commendable familiarity with some of the famous bloodhounds of fiction, and entitles you to Honorable Mention.

Happy recollecting!

ENTRANCE LINES

An Unusual Quiz

by JON L. BREEN

1. "Forgive my not rising, Van. I have the whole weight of the modern evolution in art resting on my legs. Furthermore, this plebeian early rising fatigues me, y'know."

2. "Where's the beer?"

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3. "As a matter of fact, I can't return the compliment. You just lured me away from a perfect book-lover's paradise. I was at the point of getting the dealer to let me have a priceless Falconer first-edition, intending to borrow the money from you at headquarters."

4. "No knife are present in neighborhood of crime."

5. "It's very kind of you, sir, I'd like to do it. But I can't promise to win."

6. "What the devil have you—or rather, what have you and the devil been up to, Ross?"

7. "I've found it! I've found it. I have found a reagent which is precipitated by haemoglobin, and by nothing else."

8. "He is a very little fellow, that's true, and would do better for the *Théâtres des Variétés.*"

9. ". . . what they really meant in the Middle Ages by the heavens being incorruptible."

(*Answers on page 47*)

Solution to

DOUBLE CROSS-WORD PUZZLE

(*Puzzle on page 92*)

R	A	W	E	R	■	S	C	A	R	■	M	A	T	E
E	L	I	S	E	■	R	O	M	A	■	A	D	A	M
F	I	R	S	T	■	S	P	I	V	■	R	A	K	E
S	T	E	E	R	S	■	S	T	I	C	K	M	E	N
■	■	■	S	E	A	S	■	Y	O	U	■	E	N	D
M	C	M	■	A	S	I	S	■	L	E	E	■	■	■
B	L	E	W	T	H	E	W	H	I	S	T	L	E	■
A	I	N	E	■	■	V	I	A	■	■	R	A	T	A
■	P	U	T	T	H	E	F	I	N	G	E	R	O	N
■	■	■	S	U	O	■	T	R	I	O	■	K	N	T
E	V	A	■	N	U	T	■	S	T	O	A	■	■	■
M	E	C	H	A	N	I	C	■	A	F	F	O	R	D
B	R	I	O	■	D	A	R	B	■	E	T	H	E	R
E	N	D	O	■	E	R	I	E	■	R	O	N	D	O
D	E	S	K	■	D	A	B	S	■	S	N	O	O	P

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QUEEN'S QUICKIES: *Be Your Own Detective!*

SEVEN DEAD WOMEN:
Who Killed Nancy Parker?

by EDWARD D. RADIN

FEW CASES IN RECENT YEARS HAVE stirred as much interest among criminologists as the murder of Mrs. Nancy Parker, 22, wife of Darrel Parker, the city forester of Lincoln, Nebraska. Even the setting was unusual—an isolated modern cottage inside sprawling Antelope Park, home of the municipal zoo.

At 12:09 Wednesday afternoon, December 14, 1955, police were notified that Parker had returned home for lunch and found his wife's body. The young couple, college sweethearts from Iowa, had been married only 18 months.

To the experienced investigators, headed by Police Chief Joe Carroll, the scene clearly spelled out a sex crime. The seminude victim was lying on top of her bed, garrotted with a rope, her hands lashed together, and two handkerchiefs stuffed into her mouth. Nearby on the floor were an electric blanket, its control knocked down and the current on, and a pair of blue jeans and panties torn from her body. Her sweatshirt had almost been shredded and the straps on her bra were broken.

Bruises showed she had been punched in the face. Since the body was still warm with no signs of *rigor mortis,* doctors were able to set the time of murder between 10:30 and 11:30 that morning.

This eliminated Parker as a possible suspect. From 10 o'clock until shortly after noon he had been in full view of thousands of office workers while decorating a giant Christmas tree in front of the state Capitol. In addition, he had been at work in distant Pioneer Park since shortly before 8 a.m.

Parker said Nancy normally would have left with him at 7:30 for her post as dietitian for a local grain mill but she had arranged to take the day off, planning to address Christmas cards and then shop for gifts. They got up together when their alarm went off at 6:25 and she prepared their breakfast of cereal, toast, bacon and eggs. Neatly arranged on a bridge table in the living room were a stack of greeting cards and a list of names.

Detectives located two carpenters who said they had noticed a dark-blue car parked for several hours

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about 200 feet from the cottage. It was gone at noon.

Some 24 hours later, a farmer near the city found Henry Long hiding in his hayloft. Long's clothes were disheveled and there were fresh scratches on his face. He was unable to explain the lacerations and was equally vague about where he had been Wednesday. He had been drinking and could not tell how he got to the barn or what he was doing there. Long was certain on one point: he didn't know there was a cottage in Antelope Park. The city had just completed the building in October as a home for its forester.

Investigators made their second arrest when they learned that Frank York, an ex-convict, had made threats against Parker when he, York, had been fired recently as a tree trimmer. York had worked in Antelope Park and knew the location of the cottage. He became a red-hot suspect when records disclosed he owned a dark-blue sedan.

York vehemently denied the murder. Now employed on the night shift in a lumber mill, he said he had finished work at 6 a.m. Wednesday, had something to eat, was in bed by 7:30, and had not got up until late afternoon. "My landlady can tell you I didn't leave my room," he said.

His alibi fell apart when the rooming-house owner told police she had left town Tuesday and had not returned until Wednesday evening. She added that York was surly and kept to himself. The prisoner was defiant when questioned again, insisting, "I'm telling the truth. Go ahead and prove I'm not."

Police were unable to locate any witnesses who had seen Long or York near the murder scene. Repeated interrogations did not get either one to change his story.

The autopsy confirmed that death had been due to strangling. Surgeons said they found no evidence of criminal assault and noted that digestion had stopped some 40 minutes after eating. They admitted they could not tell when Nancy had last eaten.

Both the Parkers were well-known in Lincoln. Darrel often lectured before garden clubs, and as part of her job, Nancy frequently had appeared on local TV demonstrating nourishing but non-fattening menus, her slender shapely figure the envy of many viewers.

When six days passed with no further progress and with public clamor rising, Chief Carroll conferred with County Attorney Elmer Scheele. The two men reviewed the information.

Carroll suddenly looked up from a report and said, "I can crack the killer's alibi."

How good a detective are you? You have all the essential facts Chief Carroll had in this true crime. Who killed Nancy Parker? . . . You will find the real-life solution on the next page.

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Real-Life Solution to

WHO KILLED NANCY PARKER?

by EDWARD D. RADIN

"We've been misled and the autopsy report proves it," Chief Carroll continued. "Everything pointed to a sex crime, but doctors said she had not been assaulted. Only one person would have bothered to frame such a scene and that's Darrel Parker. The autopsy also knocks out his perfect alibi. We know Nancy ate a substantial breakfast, the kind dietitians recommend so there's no need for any mid-morning snack. That means she was strangled 40 minutes after breakfast—and that means *she was dead before Parker left for work.*"

"But her body still was warm—that's why doctors think she was killed about eleven o'clock," the prosecutor pointed out.

"Don't forget that electric blanket on the floor," Carroll replied. "Parker simply placed it over her, snapped it on, and kept the body warm until he reported the murder. Then he threw the blanket to the floor to simulate a struggle."

Parker had been allowed to go to Des Moines for his wife's funeral. When he returned to Lincoln he scoffed at Chief Carroll's deductions but confessed after undergoing a lie-detector test.

He claimed he became enraged that morning when Nancy refused his request for love-making and he choked her. When he realized she was dead, he acted on the spur of the moment to frame the scene and use the electric blanket.

Of intense interest to criminologists is the fact that Parker had come up with a brand-new scheme to delay *rigor mortis* and keep a corpse warm. In so doing he destroyed the reliability of a method used by generations of doctors to determine the approximate time of death.

On May 3, 1956, he was found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

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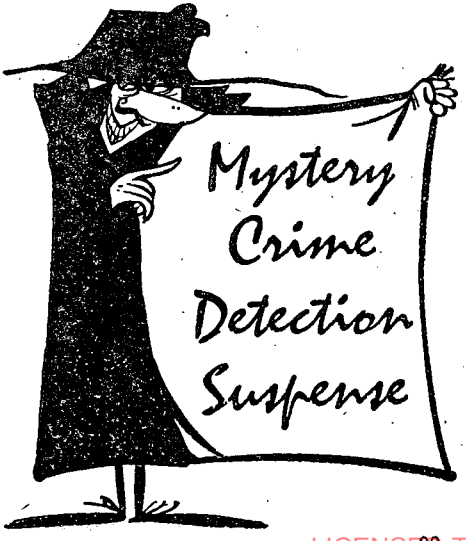

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a *NEW* detective *NOVELET* about

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Lloyd Biggle, Jr.'s octogenarian detective, Grandfather Rastin, has achieved anthology status. "Grandfather and the Pair of Knaves" (published in EQMM as "Grandfather and the Labor Day Mystery") was selected by Anthony Boucher for his BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR *(1966); and "Grandfather and the Great Horseshoe Mystery," perhaps Grandfather's greatest case, appeared in* ELLERY QUEEN'S 1968 ANTHOLOGY.

Here, now, is the newest Grandfather investigation, and the old man, as irascible, peppery, and shrewd as ever, faces one of his most baffling mysteries. Who stole

a Bunsen burner
a ceramic brooch
a slide rule
a book
and $68 (in cash)

from Borgville High School? And why? . . . An interesting and cleverly constructed story of "pure" detection . . .

GRANDFATHER AND THE PHANTOM THIEF

by LLOYD BIGGLE, Jr.

THE BORGVILLE HIGH SCHOOL crime wave happened on a Tuesday during fourth period, which is right after lunch, and only lasted for a couple of minutes. During that time someone stole a new Bunsen burner from the chem room, a ceramic brooch from the art room, a cheap slide rule from Mr. Gryce's room, an expensive book, and $68 from Miss Elson's bag.

Things don't often get stolen in Borgville High, so just one missing item would have caused a flap. Even so, the brooch and the Bunsen burner and the book and the slide rule didn't exactly add up to grand larceny, and Mr. Olmstead, our principal, probably would have handled the matter himself and kept it out of the papers if it hadn't been for the $68.

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The minute he heard about the missing money he called Sheriff Pilkins. He admitted afterward that this was a mistake, which shows you how serious a mistake it was. Teachers rarely admit they're wrong, and principals never do.

Sheriff Pilkins didn't see anything very complicated about the problem. He thought all he had to do was search 217 students. Mr. Olmstead suggested diplomatically that the Sheriff might lose a few votes if he and his deputies started searching high school girls, so he turned that job over to Miss Frailing, the girls' gym teacher, and he told his deputy, Steve Carling, to search the boys.

Steve is not the brightest deputy sheriff in the world, or even in Borg County, but after he'd searched ten or twelve of us it occurred to him that it wasn't really necessary to undress a student to find out whether he had that big book or even a Bunsen burner concealed on his person. He mentioned this to Pilkins, and the Sheriff decided to send everyone back to class and search the lockers instead.

He encountered a momentary obstacle in Jim Douglas, who is president of the Borgville High School Civics Club. Jim insisted that the Sheriff had already committed one felony by searching students without due process, and now he was about to commit another by opening lockers without a search warrant; and anyway, Jim announced, the Sheriff was a pretty poor excuse for a law officer if he couldn't catch one guilty student without humiliating 216 innocent ones.

"All right, smark aleck," the Sheriff said. "Where were you during the fourth period?"

"I refuse to answer questions without the benefit of legal counsel," Jim answered.

Two more deputies had arrived by then, and the Sheriff told them to take Jim to the principal's office and put him through the wringer.

Well, the lockers got searched. Mr. Olmstead has all the combinations on file; and he was too shook up about Miss Elson's $68 to tolerate any nonsense about search warrants, even from the president of the Civics Club. The Sheriff and his deputies searched the lockers for the rest of the afternoon, and they said afterward that they wouldn't have believed the amount of junk that a student could cram into one small locker if they hadn't seen it with their own eyes.

They found dirty clothes and leftovers from last fall's lunches and enough waste paper for a Salvation Army drive, but—contrary to reports that circulated later—no marijuana and no pornography unless you want to include Betty Bronson's paperback copy of *Peyton Place* that she'd talked Miss Burkart into approving as optional outside reading.

They didn't turn up any of the stolen items, and no money except

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the dime that Tracy Corning had dropped in her locker six weeks before and hadn't been able to find.

It was an hour after dismissal time when the Sheriff finally turned us loose, and then we had to march past a gamut of deputies as we left the building and let them search our notebooks and brief cases. We were almost two hours late getting home, which worried our parents. The bus drivers had to be paid overtime, which worried the School Board. Parents started telephoning the school to find out what had happened, which worried Mr. Olmstead. It also worried the Sheriff, because all those parents were voters.

All things considered, it was a very worrisome day, and the most worried of all was Miss Elson, because the $68 was from a social security check she'd cashed for her next-door neighbor.

The Sheriff and his deputies stayed there until midnight, searching the school, and they returned the next morning for another go at the students. By noon Sheriff Pilkins was threatening to suppress the school paper and arrest the whole senior class, and that was when Mr. Olmstead did what he should have done in the first place.

He telephoned my Grandfather Rastin.

I first heard about it when Mr. Olmstead came up to the cafeteria during lunch period and asked me if I'd mind picking up Grandfather.

"Did he stop laughing long enough to say he'd come?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I got home yesterday I told him what the Sheriff had been doing, and he was still laughing at breakfast, so I thought maybe—"

"I didn't think it was funny," Mr. Olmstead snapped.

I ate the rest of my sandwich very quietly, and then I got my jalopy and went for Grandfather.

Lunch period wasn't quite over when Grandfather and I pulled into the school parking lot. Mr. Lawton, the chemistry teacher, was just driving away in his Cadillac convertible, and I told Grandfather, "That's what I want for Christmas."

"The Texas Company would declare a dividend every time you started it," he said.

Mr. Lawton wheeled onto Mud Lake Road, and at the same time Mr. Jaffrey, the band director, putt-putted into view on his motorbike. This is a sight you don't believe even when you see it, because Mr. Jaffrey weighs maybe 300 pounds and it's a small motorbike. He looks like a big dog trying to ride a flea.

As he and Mr. Lawton approached each other, Mr. Jaffrey swerved into the left-hand lane, and Mr. Lawton mashed his accelerator, and they ran head on at each other until Mr. Lawton swerved out of the way at the last instant.

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Grandfather glowered. "What kind of imbecility is that?"

"They do that all the time," I said. "They're both bachelors, and when school started they rented a house together over in Wiston. They hadn't lived there for more than a day and a half before they commenced hating each other, but they're stuck with the lease through next summer."

Mr. Jaffrey putt-putted up beside my jalopy and climbed off his motorbike. "Hi, Johnny," he said. "Who's the antique Yul Brynner?"

He shouldn't have said that. Grandfather has been bald for a long time—he claims he lost his hair as a result of driving around in an open car back in the winter of '25—but he still can be mighty sensitive about it. "This is my Grandfather Rastin," I told him. "Mr. Olmstead asked him to solve the thefts."

"Oh," Mr. Jaffrey said. "I thought maybe one of the kids had come up with an anti-Beatle haircut."

He waddled toward the main entrance, which is in the old building, and Grandfather and I headed for the new wing where Mr. Olmstead's office is. Mr. Olmstead shook hands with Grandfather and told me I was excused from classes and should take Grandfather anywhere he wanted to go and tell him what he wanted to know if I could. We waited until the corridors cleared and the second bell rang for fourth period, and then we started out.

Borgville High is shaped like a lopsided T. The bottom is the old building, which is two stories high, and at the top are two new one-story annexes. One annex has the principal's and the superintendent's offices, the counselor's office, the teachers' lounge, and a couple of classrooms. The other annex, on the opposite side of the old building, has the homemaking room, the chemistry room, the music office and practice rooms, and the gymnasium, which is also the auditorium and the band practice room. The architect who put the homemaking and chemistry and music rooms together in that new annex was a real smart cookie—students who produce anti-social sounds and smells in Borgville High are off where they won't bother anyone but themselves.

A corridor runs straight through from one annex to the other, intersecting the first-floor corridor in the old building. At that intersection, right by the stairs, there's a monitor who sits in a chair placed where he can see the entire length of both corridors. On the second floor, by the stairs at the other end of the old building, there's another monitor.

Howie Orlich, the smartest kid in the senior class, had been fourth-period monitor the day before on the first floor, but he'd lost his job after all those thefts happened right under his nose without him seeing a thing. Mort Palmer had taken his place, and as we came down the cor-

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ridor from Mr. Olmstead's office, Mort, who had been taking part in a lunch-period basketball game, trotted along from the other direction shaking water from his hair. He looked me over very carefully and asked, "Where's your pass?"

"I have Mr. Olmstead's permission," I said.

He leered at me. "No pass, no passie."

So I went back to the office, and Mr. Olmstead apologized and made out a pink slip for me. "I gave strict orders," he said. "I wanted to see if Mort was on his toes."

He wrote *All afternoon* on the pass, and I took it back and showed it to Mort.

"What's this?" Grandfather asked.

"It's a general pass," I said. "I can go anywhere in the school during the time written on it."

"Except the girls' rooms," Mort said, leering at me again.

"There's also a white slip," I told Grandfather. "It's a destination pass. A student going to the library from the study hall would have a white slip. He'd sign out when he left the study hall, and Miss Burkart would sign his pass at the library, and then he'd sign in and surrender the pass when he got back to the study hall. At the end of the day all the passes and all the signout sheets are sent to the office, and Mr. Olmstead's secretary files them."

"It's just like a prison," Mort said.

"You mean there's a record of where every student was during the fourth period yesterday?" Grandfather asked.

I nodded. "Where every student was, and which students left their rooms and at what time and for what purpose and where they went. That's why everyone's so confused. The thefts happened between one o'clock and one twenty, and no one signed out of anywhere before one twenty-five. And Howie was sitting right here and didn't see anyone, and yet all those things were stolen."

"That's very interesting," Grandfather said.

"It sure is," I said. "There's only one explanation. Borgville High has a phantom thief."

Grandfather chuckled. "No wonder Pilkins is in a flap. He has trouble enough with real thieves."

We went first to the chemistry room, which isn't used during the fourth period. "Mr. Lawton teaches a seventh-grade science class over at the elementary school," I said. "Before he left he set up an experiment he wanted to show his fifth period chemistry class, and when he came back the Bunsen burner was gone."

Grandfather walked over and looked at a conglomeration of tubes and flasks on Mr. Lawton's desk. "Is this where it was?"

I nodded. "It's the same experiment. Because of the excitement about the thefts he didn't get to do it yesterday. You'll notice, though,

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that he didn't leave a Bunsen out today. At first he thought maybe he'd forgot to hook one up, but after he heard about the thefts he checked and it had been stolen. He's irked, because it was the only new burner he had."

"Hmm. Show me the other rooms."

We went back to the old building. The first room on the right after you turn the corner is Miss Elson's. She was there alone—fourth period is her free period—and she looked even more worried than she had the day before.

"Just where was your purse?" Grandfather asked her.

"On my desk." She sniffed into her handkerchief. She's a real nice old lady, and she's been teaching in Borgville almost long enough to remember when Grandfather had hair. We all felt sorry for her.

"I thought I'd only be gone a minute," she said. "I went up to the cafeteria to ask Mrs. Derry about having coffee for Open House next week—the homemaking girls will make the cookies—and we got to talking, and it was one twenty when I got back."

"Just when did you miss the money?"

"Right away. I looked in my purse for a pencil. I'd had the bills folded and partly tucked—here, I'll show you—in this inside pocket. I didn't put them in my billfold because I didn't want them mixed up with my money."

"How much money was in your billfold?"

"Four dollars and sixty-three cents. The Sheriff made me count it. As far as I could tell, nothing was touched except the sixty-eight dollars."

"The thief saw that money as soon as he opened your purse," Grandfather said. "Obviously he grabbed it and ran."

"I should have seen Mrs. Derry during lunch period," Miss Elson said, "but Mrs. Wagner has been sick and needed the money to buy medicine, and the bank is closed after school, so I ate quickly and drove over to the bank. When I got back I remembered about the coffee for Open House and I just didn't think to take my purse with me."

She sniffed again and went on: "Nothing like this has *ever* happened. Not in Borgville High. I know they're always having trouble in Wiston, but you know those big city children. Our Borgville children are *good*. They don't take things. At least, they never have."

Grandfather told her about the one bad apple, but his version is that while a bad apple may spoil the barrel it can make a much more interesting cider. "Do you have insurance?" he asked.

She said she had life insurance and medical insurance and car insurance, but she didn't think any of those policies would cover the money in her purse.

Next we crossed the corridor to

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the art room. All the posters and drawings were still on display, but the ceramics projects had been locked up. Miss Rogers, the art teacher, also has the fourth period free, but she wasn't in the room.

"Where was the brooch?" Grandfather asked.

"On the table nearest the door," I said. "There was a mess of stuff there that the junior art class made —brooches, earrings, bracelets, ashtrays, paperweights—"

"Anyone have any theories as to why the thief took only one ceramic?"

I shook my head. "Sally Winks thinks it's because that was the best one, but that's only because she made it."

"Next room," Grandfather said.

Mr. Sadler was teaching a biology class next door to Miss Elson's room, and on the other side of that room was Mr. Gryce's mathematics classroom.

"He has a free period, too," I said. "He's probably down in the teachers' lounge with Miss Rogers. That's where they were yesterday. They're engaged, and they're holding long discussions trying to figure out whether two married teachers can get along on two single teachers' salaries."

"Where was the slide rule?"

"On his desk."

We moved on to the library, which is on the other side of the corridor and just beyond the entrance. Grandfather asked Miss Burkart, the librarian, about the missing book, and she said, "Miss Rogers came after it just before the fourth period started. Someone had put it on the wrong shelf and I couldn't find it, so she said she'd come back later. And of course I found it two minutes after she left. I put it on the checkout desk there by the door. When I looked again, it was gone, and I thought she'd taken it and forgotten to sign the card."

"Where were you when you thought she took it?" Grandfather asked.

"Working on the shelves at the back of the room." She sighed. "A disorganized library is no library at all, and if I don't check shelves once a week I can't find anything. I'm only here afternoons—in the morning I teach English—and the shelves didn't get checked last week because I was cataloguing new books."

Grandfather sat down at one of the tables and looked the room over, scowling. Just then Sue Walton and Mary Fasuli came in from the study hall, and they picked out books, and Miss Burkart checked out the books and stamped their pass slips.

"I spend most of my time running from one end of the room to the other," she complained, and went back to the shelves.

"The first question," Grandfather said, "is whether there's any significance in *what* was stolen, and

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if there is I can't see it. Those things don't add up no matter how you arrange them."

"There are two theories about that," I said. "One says it was a boy, on account of the Bunsen burner and the slide rule, and because there were about fifty boys taking gym yesterday and everyone knows a teacher can't keep track of that many boys in a gymnasium. The other theory says it was a girl because of the brooch and the book and because some girls were practicing in a music room and only a girl could have found the money that fast in a woman's purse."

"What do you think?" Grandfather asked.

"I think it was a boy. He could have wanted the brooch to give to someone, and as for the book—it was a big art book, *The Works of Michelangelo,* with a lot of pictures of statues and paintings and things. Some of the art books that size are kept locked up because they have reproductions of nude paintings. I think it was a boy, and he thought it was one of those books."

Grandfather called to Miss Burkart, "Were there any nude pictures in the Michelangelo book?"

Miss Burkart tilted her nose. "I wouldn't know, I'm sure. Ask Miss Rogers—that's *her* specialty."

Grandfather pushed back his chair and motioned to me, and we climbed the stairs to the second floor, where Joe Bratcher was monitor. I waved my pink slip at Joe, and Grandfather looked in at the cafeteria, which is the study hall except during lunch period, and then he went the whole length of the corridor looking into every room. We used the stairs at the other end of the building, and I tried to give my pink slip to Mort Palmer again, but he was studying geometry and told me to cut the comedy.

Grandfather sat down on the steps and asked, "What's this between Miss Burkart and Miss Rogers?"

"Well, last year it was Miss Burkart and Mr. Gryce who were trying to add up salaries, and they couldn't quite make it work out. Then Miss Rogers came here this year, and she is maybe better at arithmetic, or at least at figures. So Miss Burkart takes digs at Miss Rogers whenever she can, and Miss Rogers isn't above digging back once in a while."

Mr. Gryce came by and pretended to have a stroke when he saw Mort studying geometry. Mr. Jaffrey waddled down to the teachers' lounge and came back carrying a paper cup of coffee, which is against the rules, and he stopped and pretended he was going to baptize Mort with it. Mort told him to get lost.

"Johnny," Grandfather said suddenly. "Pretend you're the thief. Start at the chemistry room and make out you're stealing those things. I want to time you."

So I went to the chemistry room

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and stole a non-existent Bunsen burner, and then I went to Miss Elson's room and told her we were doing an experiment and took a non-existent $68 from her purse. I went through the motions of swiping the brooch from the art room and the slide rule from Mr. Gryce's room and the book from the library, and then I went on up the stairs as far as the study hall, which is the route *I* had figured out for the thief.

When I came back down the stairs Grandfather called to me to do it again, this time going the other way; so I worked back from the library to the chemistry room. Miss Elson looked at me rather strangely when I popped into her room for another go at her purse, and I was feeling a bit silly about it myself.

"Two and a half minutes," Grandfather said when I got back. "And you dawdled. The thief wouldn't have dawdled. It could have been done in less than two minutes, easy. I don't suppose this school has such a thing as a rocking chair?"

"I've never seen one here," I said.

"If I was designing a school, I'd make all the chairs rocking chairs. They stimulate thought." He scowled. "It's the *order* of the thefts that doesn't make sense. I think we can safely assume that the thief worked straight down the corridor —if he'd wandered back and forth or retraced his steps he'd have been begging to be caught. On the other hand, no matter where he *started*, Miss Elson's room should have been his last stop."

"Why?" I asked.

"Sixty-eight dollars is a lot of money. To a student it's a small fortune. He wouldn't take the risk of stealing a lot of claptrap with the money already in his pocket. He'd head for wherever he was supposed to be and stay there. So he stole the Bunsen burner and the money—and stopped—or he stole the book and the slide rule and maybe the brooch and then the money—and stopped. The money *had* to be taken last, and yet it wasn't, not unless he paraded up and down the corridor like an imbecile, and imbeciles aren't supposed to be in high school. It doesn't make sense. I'd better have a look at those passes and signout sheets."

We went to the office, and Mr. Olmstead's secretary, Mrs. Fletcher, showed Grandfather the records. He looked at them for thirty seconds, shook his head, and pushed them aside. "Forty-two names," he muttered. "It might as well be the whole student roster."

I followed him into Mr. Olmstead's office where he closed the door and said quietly, "Has it occurred to anyone that the thief could have been a teacher?"

Mr. Olmstead winced. "I'd hate to think so, but I also hate to think it was a student."

"How many people knew that Miss Elson cashed that check?"

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"Quite a few, I'm afraid. We're a small school, and there aren't many secrets."

"Teachers?"

"Teachers and students."

"Johnny, what do you say?"

"Some girls asked Miss Elson if they could make up a quiz during lunch period," I said. "She told them she was going to the bank. I don't know how many students knew she was going to cash a check."

"Did you?"

"No. But Betsy Morgan heard her tell Miss Rogers."

"So teachers *and* students knew," Grandfather said. "I think you'd better make a list of the teachers who have a free fourth period, and also of teachers like Miss Burkart and Mr. Jaffrey, who seem to have no class to keep them in one place. You'd better include the janitors, too, and your secretary, and anyone else who has the right to wander around the building."

"I don't believe it," Mr. Olmstead said, shaking his head.

"Put yourself on it, too," Grandfather said. "Then the others can't complain when the Sheriff lights into them. Look. There's just one kind of person in this school whom a monitor would pay so little attention to that he might not see him at all, and that's an adult. A student he'd look at, because that's his job. He's there to make certain that students are where they're supposed to be. Teachers and janitors and secretaries are none of his business. Further, a teacher would have a lot better chance to dispose of the stolen property. Did Pilkins search the teachers' brief cases after school yesterday?"

"No. All right. I'll have the list made up for you now."

"Not for me," Grandfather said. "Give it to Pilkins. He's good with lists, and his mind works best when it has a track to run on."

We went back to the old building, and Grandfather sat down on the steps again. Five minutes later Sheriff Pilkins came along waving Mr. Olmstead's new list. "You!" he bellowed.

Grandfather didn't say anything.

"What's he doing here?" the Sheriff asked me.

"Mr. Olmstead invited him."

"He would. Look here, this is *my* investigation."

"Then why aren't you investigating?" Grandfather asked.

The Sheriff sat down on the other side of the steps and found an itch in the little bald spot on top of his head. "You think it was one of these?" He pointed to the list.

"It could have been."

"Got any idea as to which one?"

Grandfather shook his head.

"Got any ideas at all?"

"A few," Grandfather said. "Did you check with the bank to see if Miss Elson really cashed that check?"

"Now see here. You don't think for one minute—"

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"Of course not. But I don't know, either. Do you? And then I've been wondering what anyone would want with a Bunsen burner, since they run on gas and Borgville doesn't have gas."

The Sheriff stared at him.

"Of course quite a few homes have bottled gas," Grandfather went on, "and I suppose it's possible that—"

The Sheriff scrambled to his feet and legged it down the corridor toward Mr. Olmstead's office. As well as I could remember, it was the shortest interview he'd ever had with Grandfather.

Miss Elson went to the teachers' lounge, nodding at Mort as if she was glad to see that one monitor was awake. Miss Rogers came along, and when she saw me standing there she stopped to ask Mort if they were now having monitors monitor monitors.

The bell rang. Mort got up, fell in step with Susan Long, who came out of biology. I backed up against the wall to avoid being stepped on, but Grandfather stayed where he was, scowling, and let the traffic move around him. The corridors soon cleared except for some girls with gym excuses, who straggled past heading for the study hall.

The fifth-period bell rang. Jeff Osman came hurrying down the corridor to take over as monitor, and right on his heels, swinging a brief case, came Mr. Lawton, returning from his elementary science class. I showed my pink slip to Jeff, and Grandfather stepped out and intercepted Mr. Lawton.

We call him "The Mouse That Roars," because he's a little man, smaller than most of his students, but when he wants to turn it on he has a voice that could be used for public address announcements in Yankee Stadium. He's one of Borgville High's best teachers, and he teaches the elementary science class during his free period because he doesn't think his high school students had the right kind of preparation in science.

"You were gone all through the fourth period yesterday?" Grandfather asked him.

He nodded. "I have one class at the elementary building, and I have to hop to make connections. Anything I need for my fifth-period class I set up during lunch period, before I leave. That's why the Bunsen burner was out."

"Can you think of any reason why a student would take a Bunsen burner?"

"No. The students who might have a use for it are the ones I'd least suspect. The others—" He turned on the voice. "Let's see that pass, son."

Ed Edwards, who'd come ambling along with his fat innocent face hanging out, jumped three feet in the air and handed over his white slip. Mr. Lawton glanced at it and handed it back to him. "It's only good for the fifth period," Mr. Law-

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ton told him. "At that rate you may not make it."

Ed rocketed away, and Mr. Lawton explained: "Some teachers—whom I won't name—are rather careless with passes. What was I saying? Oh, yes. The good students who might have a use for a Bunsen burner are the ones who'd be least likely to take it. The only thing I can think of is that the thief was grabbing anything he could take conveniently—the rest of the apparatus was clamped in place. To take the burner all he had to do was jerk the hose loose. I'm late. If you'll excuse me—"

Grandfather walked with him as far as the chemistry room and then went on to the music office. The office was empty and only one of the practice rooms was in use—Edna Beck was practicing her trombone. She winked at me through the window and didn't miss a note. She is a very accomplished winker. There is a joke around school about her and Sally Winks, that being Sally's name. Sally Winks, the saying goes, but Edna winks better.

Grandfather opened the middle drawer of Mr. Jaffrey's desk and found a pile of destination passes.

"How many of the students know these are here?" Grandfather asked.

"Everybody," I said. "All the teachers have them."

"In unlocked desks?"

"I guess they're supposed to lock up when they leave the room."

"This pass system suddenly looks a little less than airtight." He sat down at the desk and went through the other drawers, coming up with a sheet of blank paper and a pair of scissors.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just indulging my curiosity."

He took a pass and cut a piece of paper the same size. Then he opened the practice room door and said to Edna, "Would you like to take part in a scientific experiment?"

"Sure," she said. "What is it?"

He explained it to her, and she put down her trombone and took the blank piece of paper. We followed her down the corridor. She waved the paper at Jeff Osman and winked at him. He returned the wink. She went on to the library, with Grandfather and me following. Miss Burkart was at the back of the room, and Edna grabbed a book from the nearest shelf and called, "Shall I check myself out, Miss Burkart?"

"Go right ahead," Miss Burkart said.

Edna signed the card, stamped it and her phony pass, and walked away. She winked again at Jeff when she passed him, but he had his nose in a physics book and didn't even look up.

We caught up with her at the music room.

"How'd I do?" she asked.

"Perfect," Grandfather said. "The office records don't mean a

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thing. Any student in this school could have been loose during those critical twenty minutes, with a stolen pass or with no pass at all."

"The records wouldn't mean anything anyway," I said. "Howie Orlich was on monitor duty—remember? And during those twenty minutes *nobody* passed him. It was a phantom thief—unless you're right about monitors not paying any attention to teachers."

"I'm not. I've been watching, and I have yet to see a teacher pass a monitor without being noticed. Usually they speak."

"So what good is that list?"

"It'll give Pilkins something to do."

Mr. Olmstead came in then, looking for Grandfather, and Grandfather told him about the passes in Mr. Jaffrey's unlocked desk and how Edna had gone from the music room to the library and back with a blank piece of paper, and Mr. Olmstead turned pink like my general pass, and then white like a destination pass, and went charging off.

When we returned to the old building five minutes later there was a new monitor on duty, Pete Culver, and he took my pink slip and read it through very suspiciously. And down at the end of the corridor Mr. Olmstead was conversing with Mr. Jaffrey, but not in conversational tones.

Grandfather sat down on the steps again. A moment later Mr. Jaffrey waddled by and whispered at me, "You keep old baldy out of my desk—see?"

"Have you any way of knowing how many of your students were loose in the corridors during the fourth period yesterday?" Grandfather asked him.

"Passes—bah!" Mr. Jaffrey said. "If the teachers spend all their time keeping books on the students, how can they do any teaching? I have kids coming and going all day long. They come for music lessons, they come to practice, they run errands. There are about a dozen kids in this school who can't be trusted, and those we keep an eye on. They don't bother me because I won't have them in band. The rest are good kids. We've never had any trouble before."

"Don't your students use passes?"

"Sure. But it's just a formality to keep the office happy. A kid needs a pass. I tell him to make it out himself. I have more important things to do."

"Olmstead doesn't seem to think it's just a formality," Grandfather said.

Mr. Jaffrey shrugged. "The whole system is a bunch of nonsense. Look. Who are the monitors? The best students, because they can get along without a study period. That's the theory. The way it works out, all it means is that they do their studying in the corridor instead of in the study hall. They're able to concentrate, which is why

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they're good students. Some of them concentrate so well that they don't even see an elephant like me passing unless I step on them.

"If you ask me, the monitors should be the dumb students, who don't study anyway and can't concentrate. Then the monitors would do some monitoring. Me, I couldn't care less. I'm leaving at the end of the year anyway. I have a job at a school where there's less bookkeeping and they serve real food in the cafeteria."

He waddled away.

"Do you have a nickname for Mr. Jaffrey?" Grandfather asked.

I nodded. "Blubber Boy. He's very particular about what he eats. He goes uptown and has lunch at the Star Restaurant."

"That so? Hmm."

"That's what caused the trouble between him and Mr. Lawton—one of the things, anyway. They started keeping house together and sharing the expenses. Mr. Jaffrey not only eats a lot, he likes expensive food. Mr. Lawton said it was bad enough trying to feed his car, which is a gas hog, without having to feed Mr. Jaffrey, who is a porterhouse steak hog. They stopped sharing expenses after the first week."

"Is that where Jaffrey was coming from on his motorbike? The Star Restaurant?"

"Yes."

There was a ruckus at the other end of the building and Deputy Steve Carling marched down the stairs hauling Howie Orlich along by one arm, Steve looking mad and Howie looking white and very scared. They swept past us, headed toward the office, and a moment later Sheriff Pilkins came hurrying after them.

He stopped when he saw Grandfather and announced, "I'm a nitwit!"

Grandfather arched his eyebrows.

"Since this time yesterday I've been trying to see how a thief could operate with a monitor sitting there. It wasn't until three minutes ago that I figured it out. The monitor was the thief!"

He shook his head, trying to act disgusted with himself when he was actually bursting with pride. "You can go home, now. Everything is under control."

And he hurried away.

"Maybe," Grandfather said softly. "But I think not. It would be logical if it was just the money, but I can't see the monitor wandering off in both directions to steal things when the first teacher who looked out would be wanting to know why the monitor's chair was empty. I'd also like to know what he's supposed to have done with the stuff."

Grandfather sat there on the steps, scowling and muttering to himself, and when I got tired waiting I sat down beside him and watched the traffic. Pete Culver was reading his geography book but looking up and down the corridors every few seconds.

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Mr. Armbruster, one of the janitors, started bringing folding chairs down from the second floor, and Mr. Sadler, who is assistant principal when he isn't teaching biology, came from the office and caught him at it. They argued for a moment and went off in different directions to check. Mr. Jaffrey walked past and did some muttering of his own when he saw Grandfather.

At the other end of the corridor a bunch of kids came down the stairs from the study hall to use the library. A few students went by running errands, and Pete stopped them and checked their passes. Mr. Frazier, the French and Latin teacher, who had a free period, went to the teachers' lounge, and Miss Berg, the history teacher, who didn't, went to the office.

I pointed out to Grandfather that the whole tenth-grade history class was now free to wander off in all directions stealing things, and he grunted. Mr. Armbruster returned and started carrying the chairs back to the second floor.

The bell rang. Pete snapped his book shut and took off, and I moved away from the stairs and waited for the traffic to clear. Grandfather stayed where he was, still scowling and muttering. The sixth-period bell rang.

Grandfather got up slowly. "Now I see how it was done."

"Tell me," I said. "I'd like to be a phantom—not to steal things, just to get out of school on hot afternoons. Where are you going?"

"To call the bank."

"Didn't Sheriff Pilkins call the bank?"

"Probably, but he wouldn't ask the right questions."

I started after him, and Syd Walton, who was taking over as sixth-period monitor, called me back and made me show my pass. Before I could catch up with him, Grandfather had chased Mr. Olmstead out of his private office and closed the door. He came out a couple of minutes later and said, "I'd like to have some people down here. Right away."

"Who?" Mr. Olmstead asked.

"The boy who was on monitor duty when it happened."

"Howie Orlich. The Sheriff just took him to Wiston."

"Call the Sheriff's office," Grandfather told Mrs. Fletcher. "They can reach him by radio. Tell Pilkins I want that boy back here, and fast."

"Who else?" Mr. Olmstead asked.

"All the teachers who had things stolen."

Mr. Olmstead wrote the names on a piece of paper. "Miss Elson, Miss Rogers, Miss Burkart, Mr. Lawton, and Mr. Gryce. Anyone else?"

"Mr. Jaffrey."

Mr. Olmstead hurried away, and Grandfather and I went to the teachers' lounge and waited.

The teachers arrived one at a time, because Mr. Olmstead had to

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make arrangements about their sixth-period classes. Then he had to find Mr. Jaffrey, which took longer. In the meantime, the Sheriff stormed in spouting questions, and when Grandfather wouldn't answer them he sat down in the corner and sulked.

Howie Orlich sat down on the sofa with me, still looking scared. Finally Mr. Olmstead and Mr. Jaffrey came. Mr. Olmstead took the corner opposite the Sheriff's and sat down by himself.

"It's your show," he told Grandfather.

Grandfather nodded. "I'll make this as brief as possible. The reason the monitor didn't see the thief yesterday was because there wasn't any monitor."

He paused, and everyone looked at him blankly. "This afternoon I saw monitors take their places at the beginning of every period," Grandfather went on, "but it wasn't until the sixth-period bell rang with no monitor on duty that I realized that *all three of them had been late.* Only two or three minutes, but late. Earlier this afternoon Johnny and I proved that the thief needed at most two minutes, and the reason the monitor didn't see him was because the thefts occurred at the beginning of the period before the monitor arrived. Howie?"

Howie jumped.

"Just how late were you yesterday?"

Howie gulped, thought for a moment, said apologetically, "I went in during lunch period to talk to Mr. Gryce about a trig problem—I found a way to solve it that wasn't in the book. It took longer than I thought it would, and—"

Mr. Gryce interrupted. "He was still there when the second bell rang."

"Then I went up to my locker to get my lit book," Howie said. "I wanted to do some reading during the fourth period. But gee, it couldn't have been more than—"

"Two or three minutes?" Grandfather suggested.

Howie nodded.

"Where were you at the beginning of the fourth period?" Grandfather asked Mr. Gryce.

"I went to the teachers' lounge as soon as Howie left."

"And Miss Rogers, where were you?"

"I was in the lounge when the period started."

"What about the rest of you?"

Miss Burkart had been in the library. Miss Elson was on her way to the cafeteria when the second bell rang, and Mr. Lawton was on his way to the Elementary School. Mr. Jaffrey said, very politely, that his whereabouts were none of Grandfather's business, and when Mr. Olmstead started to snap at him Grandfather waved for silence.

Sheriff Pilkins said thoughtfully, "Now all I have to do is find out what kids were late to their fourth-period classes."

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"Don't you have enough lists now?" Grandfather demanded. "What good is a name when you have no witness and no evidence? Or have you maybe located the stolen property since I last saw you?"

The Sheriff didn't say anything.

"Before we start compiling more lists," Grandfather said, "let's take a careful look at two people who could have been in the corridor about that time. Mr. Jaffrey?"

Mr. Jaffrey grinned at him. "You'd better start wearing a hat. Your brain is suffering from a lack of insulation."

"Returning from your sumptuous repast at the Star Restaurant, you entered the old building at the entrance by the library and walked to the music office, passing all the rooms from which things were stolen. Did you take Miss Elson's sixty-eight dollars, Mr. Jaffrey?"

"It's none of your business," Mr. Jaffrey said, "but just to show you what an ignoramus you are—I'm over at the elementary school three mornings and two afternoons, and Tuesdays and Thursdays are the afternoons. I go there directly from lunch. I didn't come back here at all yesterday. So sorry to disappoint you."

"The contrary. You wouldn't be a suspect anyway, because *you were headed in the wrong direction*. In concentrating on the unseeing monitor a more important problem was overlooked—the disappearing stolen goods. I think we're entitled to ask a question or two of the one person who left the building about that time. Did you take Miss Elson's sixty-eight dollars, Mr. Lawton?"

"I did not," Mr. Lawton said quietly.

"Let's see how it would have worked out. You ate lunch and returned to your room to set up an experiment you intended to perform for your fifth-period class. It was a complicated experiment, or perhaps you'd dawdled over your lunch because you had other things on your mind. In any case, you were a little later than usual. You grabbed your brief case and started out just as the second bell rang.

"Naturally you'd use the door by the library, because it's closest to the parking lot. On your way there you glanced into Miss Elson's room. Her purse was on her desk, and you knew she'd gone to the bank during lunch period to cash a check. You looked around—there was no monitor on duty and no one in the corridor. If the money hadn't been in plain sight when you opened her purse perhaps you would have thought about the consequences. But it was in plain sight, and you took it and rushed out of the room.

"But *then* you started to think. The theft would cause a commotion. Another theft, of something no teacher would be suspected of taking, would divert suspicion. There was still no one in the corridor, and no monitor. So you dashed

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into the art room to take something, anything and dashed out again. Still no one in sight.

"Next, Mr. Gryce's room. Nothing there but a slide rule, so you took that. These were trivial things, and you needed something bigger and more valuable, but there was no time. Passing the library, you looked in. On the desk by the door was a large book. One quick movement, the book was in your brief case, and you were on your way. The phantom thief's career was brief, but highly effective."

Grandfather looked at me. "If I hadn't started out reasoning that the money was taken last, I could have finished this investigation a lot sooner."

"What about the Bunsen burner?" the Sheriff asked.

"That was an afterthought, wasn't it, Mr. Lawton? You weren't wholly satisfied that you'd mystified matters sufficiently, or maybe you thought no one would suspect you if something had also been stolen from your room."

"For once Jaffrey was right," Mr. Lawton said. "You should start wearing a hat."

Mr. Jaffrey squared himself around and said apologetically, "I made an ass of myself. I beg your pardon. Borgville High could use a man like you. Can you teach chemistry?"

Grandfather turned to the Sheriff. "What are you waiting for? You have a case."

"Case, nothing! Things don't happen just because you *say* they do. Where's the evidence?"

"Try the creek at Mud Lake Road bridge. He crossed it on his way to the elementary school."

"How do I know you didn't put the stuff there yourself?"

"Called the bank, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, but Miss Elson cashed the check just like she said she did."

"Did you ask if anyone connected with this school had made a deposit —or a payment?"

The Sheriff didn't answer.

"Teachers shouldn't buy expensive cars," Grandfather said. "Not teachers with Borgville salaries. Lawton was behind in his payments, and the bank was about to take his car. He telephoned yesterday morning and asked if he could have more time, or if the bank would accept a two-thirds payment, and the bank told him no. He left his elementary class early yesterday, stopped at the bank on the way back here, and made a full payment —one hundred and ninety-eight dollars. Would you like to explain how you managed to get a hold of about one-third of that sum so quickly, Mr. Lawton?"

Mr. Lawton didn't say anything.

Grandfather said softly, "It's a pity. Everyone says you're a fine teacher."

The Sheriff got up and walked over to Mr. Lawton. Suddenly Howie Orlich exclaimed, "Oh! *Mr. Lawton!*"

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We all turned and looked at him. "Sure," he said. "I saw *Mr. Lawton* in the corridor yesterday. Just after I sat down I saw him come out of Mr. Gryce's room. But nobody *asked* me about *teachers*."

"Did you see him go in the library?" Grandfather asked.

"Well—no."

"Howie," Grandfather said, "they tell me you're a first-rate student and that you plan on studying engineering. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like to be an engineer."

"Do that, Howie," Grandfather said. "Don't ever let anyone talk you into trying to be a detective."

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POINT OF NO RETURN

by ANTHONY GILBERT

WHEN THE TELEPHONE RANG that evening, for a moment neither of us stirred. The instrument lives in the hall, and we answer it strictly by rote. After a minute Vanessa looked up from her exquisite petit point and said in that voice that would have launched more than a thousand ships, "Your turn, Ursie."

"Couldn't you, this once?" I suggested, though I knew it wasn't fair. "I have a problem." Whether to introduce a streak of blue into the rose and purple heraldic blossom in my tapestry frame. Vanessa waited another moment, then she laid her work aside.

"I can see you mean me to answer it," she said. "I wonder why."

As she reached the door I murmured something vague about it probably being Caro, and at once a kind of delicate ice settled on the atmosphere—as it always does these days when that name is mentioned. It's my fault, I know, but I can't help it. I'll never forgive her, not so long as I live.

When the door had closed I moved over to the window seat. Any minute now the evening star would come piercing through the dusk. I didn't really believe it would be Caro on the line, but if by some thousand-to-one chance it was, it wouldn't be me she'd be calling.

Caro Wellsley, soon to be Caro Marshall, is Vanessa's niece, the daughter of a much older sister, now dead. We don't see much of Caro in the ordinary way. She made

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a spectacular marriage when she was nineteen, carrying off Sir Miles Wellsley, a legal tycoon whose boast is that everything he touches turns to gold.

"Very uncomfortable," said Vanessa when she first heard. "I hope Caro knows what she's doing." Miles was twice Caro's age, and had pursued her ever since she was seventeen. After the marriage we saw her mostly in the society glossies, driving her Silver Cloud, or wearing a halter of pearls and a platinum mink. It was only when she was in trouble that she appeared in the flesh.

We were both teaching in the Midlands in those days—Van was a college professor and I was languages mistress at the local High School. I'd never wanted to teach—the stage would have been my choice; but I had a widowed mother and no capital and what St. Paul calls the gift of tongues, so teaching seemed the obvious solution. Until I met Vanessa Freeman at a party six years before, I'd had no prospects but trying to drum foreign languages into the minds of a succession of couldn't-care-less girls until I finally drew my pension.

But Vanessa changed all that. It still astounds me. She, who could have had anyone, to pick on me, who couldn't provide a greater contrast. She is exquisitely made, fragile, elegant, like some small beautiful enameled bird. I'd never be surprised to see her take off on wings. I'm the shaggy-dog kind of spinster, and I suppose it's fortunate for me that there's someone who likes shaggy dogs.

If you saw Vanessa and Caro together you might mistake them for mother and daughter. They both have that unforgettable air. It's more than just beauty, it's something that won't die even when beauty fades. But there the resemblance ends.

Caro was born believing the world owes her a luxurious living. Vanessa knows that anything you take must be paid for, and for all her delicate appearance she's the working partner. If the car breaks down I phone the garage, and if one of our electrical gadgets goes out of order I send for a repairman. But Vanessa flings up the hood, or goes to work with a screwdriver. I shouldn't care to be the Archangel on the Gate at the last day when Vanessa Freeman comes up for judgment. She won't give even him best.

The only person who has been able to defeat her—and I'm not sure defeat is the right word—is Caro. It happened that autumn more than two years earlier when our Great Dream became the Great Illusion. The dream was something only Van could have visualized. Out of the blue, as it were, she inherited The Cottage, where we now live, and a slice, admittedly an economical slice, of capital, and we decided to take a chance, burn our boats, throw in the jobs of which we were

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both weary, and start on a life of independence.

"Not a private teaching establishment," Van insisted. "That won't be the shape of things to come. But with your languages and my qualifications we'll open a language school with a Travel Bureau on the side."

Our pupils would be girls who wanted to specialize in foreign languages, and we would arrange careful tours for small numbers of them, and we should be the directors. Luckily for me Vanessa had an itching foot—there was hardly a city in Europe where she wouldn't find herself at home. And it didn't have to stop at Europe. See the world and be paid for doing it, I gloated. Imagine—Egypt, where you walk in the golden light, and the wild thymy hills of Greece! Too good to be true, I said—and of course it was.

Everything was in readiness. We had got the premises, we were living in The Cottage, we could commute by car each day. We hadn't actually signed the agreements, but everything was waiting—when down came Caro, like that ill-fated crow, black as a tar barrel, to toss not just a spanner but a bomb into the works.

When I came back from walking in the woods that afternoon and saw her car at the door—she was the only possessor of a Silver Cloud we were ever likely to have visit us—I wondered what on earth she wanted. It never occurred to me it might be just a social call. Provincial schoolmarms were never Caro's cup of tea. As I opened the door Van called out, "Ursie, see if the kettle's boiling and bring the brandy. We've got trouble on our hands."

When I came in, carrying the Dom-Remy, Caro was hunched by the fire, like some small bird, plumage draggled, colors quenched—but never a sparrow or a wren; a hummingbird, say, still special, still unforgettable. She looked right through me—I was never anything but that oddball Ursula Jordan whom Vanessa had inexplicably collected.

I filled a glass with brandy and Vanessa put it in Caro's hand. The look Van turned on the girl was something I'd never seen before—full of pity and tenderness, such as she had never turned on me. My own heart burned—but not for Caro.

"What's happened to Caro?" I said, trying to speak lightly.

And Van said, "She's being blackmailed."

Blackmail is something you find in books and films or read about in the newspapers, something that affects other people, never anything that touches your own life. And that Caro Wellsley, the pampered and indulged wife of a well-known and wealthy man, should be as open to such an indignity as any penny-

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plain sinner—somehow it seemed absurd.

"Who's blackmailing her?" I asked, when the silence had gone on for a long time.

And Caro spoke the name they'll find engraved on my heart when I die. "Ethel Ridgley."

The name had a sordid sound and the story was the mixture as before. Mrs. Ridgley—anyway, that's what she called herself—was owner or part proprietor of a sleazy kind of hotel, called The Penthouse, in a sleazy south-coast resort. And here for the past year the exquisite, the fêted, the immensely publicized Lady Wellsley, had been meeting her lover.

The more you have the more you want, my mother used to say. You might think that a rich husband, a four-and-a-half-thousand-pound car, mink and diamonds, and the sort of life you associate with princesses in fairy tales, to say nothing of a child (to do her justice I think Isobel was the only person Caro was capable of loving as much as she loved herself) would be enough for one woman; but no—"I had to have someone," Caro insisted. "You can't imagine what it's like living with Miles. It's always cold." She actually shivered, and that wasn't acting.

I never saw Rupert Brook in the flesh, though I did see a picture of him later. He was one of those romantic, unsatisfactory, rather lupine young men who seem to appeal to women. Not that I think he called out much maternal instinct in Caro; but he was young, younger than she, and, as subsequent events proved, was mad about her, and I mean that in a literal sense.

"It was the contrast with Miles that appealed to her," Vanessa explained later. "If all she wanted was worldly success and approval she had all that. But if nothing succeeds like success, nothing sickens like it, either."

Whatever Rupert Brook was, he certainly wasn't successful, except in his conquest of Caro. If everything Miles touched turned to gold, whatever that young man laid his hand on turned to ashes. Yet I did believe Caro when she said that at first he transformed her world. "I'd forgotten what it was like to be a human being," she told Vanessa.

Perhaps they got careless or, more likely, after a time she began to tire. Anyhow, within twelve months, she was trying to break off the relationship. "I began to think that Miles suspected something," she told us. "Once I thought I was being followed; perhaps I was wrong, but I couldn't take the chance. If ever he had proof, Miles would have separated me from Isobel, and I couldn't risk losing her for a dozen Rupert Brooks."

I think she expected young Brook to come to heel at her bidding. He'd been dancing to her piping, but now the music was over, and she wanted out. And that's when the trouble

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began. Because he wouldn't take his dismissal easily.

I wondered once if he might be in the blackmail plot, but Caro shook her head. Nevertheless he began to be a serious threat. "He rang up Miles's house," she said. "I was on tenterhooks in case Miles or his secretary should answer." He wrote—they had arranged an accommodation address for his letters (I saw Vanessa wince at that, Caro creeping down like any adulterous slut to collect her mail)—saying he would come to London unless she'd come to see him at least one more time. So in the end she promised to go.

"He was impossible, Vanessa. He wanted me to leave Miles and set up house with him. It was like trying to talk sense to a child. He hadn't a job, he was in debt at the hotel, and what were we to live on?"

It was characteristic of Miles that though his wife might appear to revel in luxury there was probably no time during her married life when she could have laid hands on £50 without her husband knowing. And he was as avid about the keeping of accounts as any suburban husband.

"He said if I didn't come to see him he'd kill himself," Caro went on. "How was I to know he *meant* it? Don't they say the ones who always threaten to make a hole in the water never do?"

Only that was just what Brook had done—not a hole in the water, but a massive dose of sleeping pills. Where did he get them, Vanessa wanted to know; but Caro said you could always get that sort of thing if you knew your way around. His landlady—this same Ethel Ridgley—found him when she took up his breakfast, and she was hours too late to be able to help. She phoned the doctor, the doctor called the police. The cause of death was obvious, the motive scarcely less so. A young man in poor circumstances, no job, no friends—it was a story you could read in the paper any day of the week.

Mrs. Ridgley said he hadn't left a note, perhaps he hadn't realized what he was doing. Naturally she'd say that, Caro agreed; it doesn't do even her kind of hotel any good to have the publicity of suicide. Still, "suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed" was the verdict. It was a pinchpenny funeral—he seemed to have no one but a married sister up north, and she couldn't get away.

"I didn't even know about it," Caro said. "It wouldn't make the London press and I didn't see the local paper. I did think it was too good to be true that he wouldn't make any more trouble. And then this Ethel Ridgley came to the surface."

True to type, and to our experience with her later, Ethel Ridgley never put anything in writing. She telephoned Caro's London address,

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identified herself, and said she had a document she would like to discuss. She had given evidence at the inquest that the dead man had left no message, no letter of any kind, but it turned out not to be true. On the contrary, he had left the sort of letter that would delight the heart of any Sunday tabloid editor, leaving no doubt at all in the reader's mind as to the identity of the woman concerned.

"And she's blackmailing you on that?" I cried. "But surely you can see she's burned her boats by telling the police that no letter existed? How can she come forward now?"

"Quite easily," Vanessa said. "She can say she found the letter later—behind a dressing table. Only I don't think she has the police in mind."

"Of course she hasn't the police in mind," Caro said. "She's giving me first refusal, and if I won't—or can't—pay her price, she'll take it to Miles."

"Does she suppose he'd submit to blackmail?"

"She knows he won't have to. Vanessa, he must never see that letter! Rupert used to write to me, and I destroyed his letters as soon as I'd read them. I never wrote to him, it was too dangerous. If Miles should get this letter he'd take Isobel away from me forever and I don't care what people say about the law giving the child to the mother, he'd override it. And if he does that I'll kill myself, I swear I will!"

"What's she asking for the letter?" I inquired.

And Caro told us, "Two thousand pounds."

"Where does that niece of yours imagine we can raise two thousand pounds?" I demanded of Vanessa when Caro, reassured and now once more as cool as silk, had driven away. "Simple to say not to worry, it'll be all right, but surely she knows every penny of our savings and every penny of your legacy are tied up in this new venture."

"Fortunately the ends aren't quite tied," Vanessa said.

I didn't believe it at first—that she would pitch our future over her shoulder as though it were no more than a pinch of salt; but to her it wasn't even a problem. She didn't go through the motions of consulting me, of explaining or pleading; it was as natural a solution to her as her next breath.

"You can't do it," I protested. "We can't go back to those slave jobs."

"It's Caro's life—literally, her life. For us it's no more than a change of plan."

Even then I cherished a hope that we could call Ethel Ridgley's bluff. She'd take a tithe of her demand, we could still cling to our enterprise—but not after I saw her. She was a shabby little peacock of a woman, so much in command of the situation she didn't even have to preen her moth-eaten plumage. I

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saw my proud Vanessa accept her conditions without protest—and if a bomb had fallen and destroyed us all I'd have had no regrets.

"I suppose you know you haven't only given away our present, you've mortgaged our future," I cried bitterly when the woman had taken herself off.

"Sufficient unto the day," murmured Vanessa, she who was the sworn enemy of clichés. It showed how far she had fallen. As for Caro, she didn't appear to think there was anything generous about the gesture. "I knew I could count on you," she told Vanessa. She was back safe in her kingdom, and what was it to her who was without?

I was right about the future, though. About a year later Miles was killed in a car crash, and in his will he had left an immense fortune tied up for his daughter, while Caro could only enjoy the interest; so my first frantic hopes of a repayment were dashed at birth. He also added a very curious codicil which would virtually make Isobel a ward of court if it could be shown that Caro had behaved in a manner that made her an unsuitable guardian for the girl. And that was Ethel's second opportunity.

She appeared as punctually as the morning tea in a well-run household. She had found in one of the street-photographer booths at Marlston a casual snapshot taken the previous year; it showed Caro in the company of a strange dark young man, with a Valentino profile. It must have been snapped in the street, but even a spinster withering on the virgin thorn, which was doubtless how Caro thought of me, could have seen they were lovers.

The production of this photograph in the right quarter could do a lot of harm, she pointed out blandly, adding in a casual manner that she was compelled to make use of this opportunity because of debts her hotel had incurred. The previous summer had been a bad season, there were extensive accounts to be met. This time the demand was smaller, but it involved a mortgage on The Cottage, where we were still living.

We hadn't gone back to teaching —some puritan streak in Vanessa made her decree that women who allowed themselves to compromise with a blackmailer weren't fit to supervise the education of the young. I thought a lot of the young could have given us lessons in compromise and put rings around us. We weren't exactly penniless. Vanessa did free-lance work, I taught three days a week in someone else's language school that was a travesty of the one we had planned, and gave lessons by correspondence. And we lived like two ladybirds in an isolation as immense as the Gobi Desert.

"We don't *have* to pay," I insisted, but I knew we would. At least this time I wouldn't allow Van to become personally involved. We

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got the money together in bundles of old banknotes, packed them into a lingerie box, and I met Ethel in the lounge of the Paddington Court Hotel. This was like every railway hotel lounge—hosts of small tables occupied by women who looked as if they had been there for a year and would still be there in the same places if one arrived twelve months later; lost anonymous women for the most part, waiting for trains that never arrived and passengers who had never set out on their journey.

Ethel came in, the same faded scornful woman she had been at our last meeting. When she walked out, with that absurd parcel swinging on her arm, she said, "I won't say goodbye, Miss Jordan. I have a feeling we may meet again."

Out of the room she flounced and onto the station platform. I sat sick and blind with fury and watched her go.

Ten minutes later she was dead —had slipped and fallen in the afternoon commuter crowd, they said, and no one quite certain how it had happened. The mysterious thing was that the parcel containing the money was never found.

Behind me in the quiet room a door opened and closed as Vanessa slipped back to her place at the fireside. I waited a minute for her to tell me her caller's name, but she said nothing.

"That was a long call," I suggested, when I couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Was it Caro, after all?" Because Caro had fallen on her feet once more. Everyone had expected her to remarry, and she had confided to us that she was shortly going to announce her engagement to Charles Marshall, another tycoon, but of a very different stamp from her first husband. "This time it's love," Vanessa had said. As if that made everything worthwhile. "Not a word till Charles is back from his mission," Caro had warned us. "But I had to tell you."

"No," said Vanessa now in reply to my question. "It wasn't Caro. That was Ethel Ridgley on the line."

I turned sharply. "Think what you're saying," I implored her. She was sitting beside the fire like a little Chinese goddess veiled in thorns. "How could it be Ethel? Unless you're going to tell me someone else was buried in her stead a year ago."

But that wasn't possible. I'd seen the woman myself, lying between the rails, with the crowd milling, and the authorities holding the people back, and the ambulance bell sounding from the frosty street. Someone had covered her, and questions were being asked and answered all around. "Don't ask me," I had said to someone shoving up against me and babbling with inhuman excitement. "I came down to get my train and I saw the crowd . . ."

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"Oh, no, she was buried all right," Vanessa agreed, "and of course it wasn't actually Ethel on the telephone. But some people are like the phoenix, that mythical bird that rises from its own ashes. It doesn't always have to assume the identical shape."

"What shape is it assuming today?" I asked.

"A man calling himself Jackson, who says he's her brother, and has something he thinks might interest us. Did she ever speak of a brother, Ursula?"

"She never spoke of anyone," I said. "She might have been Topsy who just growed."

I had been convinced from that first occasion that blackmail was no new game to her—she knew all the rules. Everything had been conducted personally, over the telephone or face to face. We had no signature, no correspondence, no postmarked envelope, nothing. She could have declared complete ignorance and we couldn't have disproved her.

"He says he was in Canada at the time of her death, and as he was next of kin the information was sent to the last address they found in her book for him. He'd left by then, and it took months for the news to catch up with him." Even then he hadn't come straight home. "He says he couldn't afford the fare," Vanessa explained.

Her voice sounded like the voice of a dead person rising from the tomb. On impulse I leaned forward and switched on her reading lamp. During the few minutes that had elapsed since the phone began to ring and her return to the room, she had changed more than during the past twelve months. It wasn't so much a pinching of features—she could never be anything less than beautiful; but something was missing. Hitherto she might have been disappointed of her hope, but the hope wasn't dead. Now it was as if some essential faith in the integrity of a justice she couldn't explain or even comprehend had died. She looked less outraged than betrayed.

"And is it his idea that we shall pay his fare back to Canada?" I murmured. I laid my hand on hers, which was as cold as snow.

"Oh, I think he'll want more than that," she told me. "But you'll be able to ask him when he comes. He's due in about thirty minutes; he only telephoned to make certain we should be here."

"I warned you," I told her, turning back to the window. At some moment unnoticed, while we were waiting, the evening star had risen. I thought of a world where people lay down in innocence and rose in hope. I wondered if we'd ever find ourselves in that world again.

"What is it this time? Another photograph?"

"A diary, found among Ethel's papers and put aside for the next of kin, if one ever turned up. He's bringing it with him."

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When the front doorbell rang Vanessa wouldn't let me admit the man alone.

"We'll go together," she said. "Union is strength."

The hall floated in shadow, but as I drew back the latch Van pressed the button of the chandelier and we were immersed in a silver flood. When one thinks of blackmailers, one imagines shabby little men with ragged mustaches, and wearing belted raincoats; but there was nothing shabby or apologetic or even openly threatening about our visitor. He blinked for an instant in the unexpected brilliance, then came charging past me, as though I wasn't even there, and went up to Vanessa.

"I hope I haven't spoiled your evening," he said, offering a hand she preferred not to notice. "But you know the old saying, If 'twere done 'twere well 'twere done quickly."

"That referred to a murder," said Vanessa, cool as a snowflake. He seemed momentarily abashed.

"Well, we must hope it doesn't come to that," he observed, trying to carry off the situation with a laugh, and following her into our living room as to the manner born. He stood in the center of the floor, making himself perfectly at home, putting a price on everything. He was a tall man, dark-haired, his eyes almost completely black, with a mobile unscrupulous face, an easy manner, and (no doubt) a black heart concealed by a surprisingly well-cut suit.

"Is that your niece?" he asked, walking over and picking up a photograph of Caro taken some years before, and showing a gay laughing girl with a riband holding back her dark hair. "I quite see you'd take a lot of chances to keep her looking that way. What was she—deb of the year?" Easily he put the picture back. I turned away abruptly and drew the curtain. "I don't like being watched," I explained. Even if it was only a star.

"Should I introduce you?" Vanessa murmured. "My friend, Miss Ursula Jordan."

He turned and bowed. "U.J.?" he said. "Oh, it's all in the diary my sister left behind—a kind of insurance, I suppose, in case of an emergency."

"We had no notion your sister had literary qualities," Vanessa observed. I recognized that tone. I knew she was going to make things as difficult as possible for us all, and it would be a hollow victory at best, since I knew Jackson held all the aces in the deck and probably had a fifth up his sleeve.

"It was no bad idea," he now said. "Like leaving a message saying where you can be found."

"I expect you did the same tonight," Vanessa said. "Your wife—"

"No woman's put my head in the noose yet," he assured her. "And, as I told you, I'm only passing through."

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"Unfortunately it doesn't seem to have helped Mrs. Ridgley," Vanessa went on. "I mean, she left the diary, but she still came to grief."

He shrugged ever so faintly. "You can't win 'em all," he said. "Now among her papers was this diary and it makes very interesting reading. And not just to me. It goes back a long way, right back to the suicide of that young fellow at The Penthouse. I can't help thinking it's a story that would prove very popular to a lot of people who have to get their thrills at second-hand."

"Through the press, no doubt," agreed Vanessa. "I think I get your meaning, Mr. Jackson. You're prepared to reduce the number of readers to two—for an adequate fee, of course."

"She knows all the answers, doesn't she?" Jackson turned to me with something approximating a wink, but I wouldn't meet his eye. "The one I had particularly in mind was Mr. Charles Marshall. I understand your niece's engagement is shortly to be announced—"

"It was clever of you to discover that," Vanessa congratulated him. "It's supposed to be secret."

He made the gesture of twirling a buoyant mustache. "Oh, I do my homework," he boasted. "You should approve, Miss Freeman. Didn't you find that your pupils who were prepared for all emergencies were the ones who came out at the top of the list—in your schoolmarming days, I mean?"

"They were still subject to viruses and runaway buses," Van told him smoothly.

"I'll lay it straight on the line, shall I?" He took a flat black book with *Diary* in gilt letters printed on the cover and put it on the table beside her. "Help yourself," he offered. "Only—no tricks, mind. I'm wondering what Mr. Marshall's reaction would be—he's an ambitious chap, I understand, and on the way up, the lucky devil—if the idea got around that he was—well, buying damaged goods."

Vanessa has one of those exquisite creamy faces that never get unbecomingly red, but her complexion changed now; she still didn't go scarlet, as I should have done, but her face assumed a corpse-like pallor. She turned abruptly toward the fire, picking up the little steel poker we keep in the hearth.

"Don't do it," warned our visitor. "You'd never get away with it."

Vanessa looked at the poker as if she didn't recognize it or know what it was doing in her hand. Then she threw it down with a clatter.

"I've always been given to understand that murder is simple," she agreed. "It's the aftermath—for instance, how on earth should I explain your presence in my house?"

It was Jackson's first sign of discomfiture. They were talking only to each other. I took up more space than either, but I might have been less than a shadow. It brought back

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to my mind the day when Van and Caro had sat there and disposed of my future as if it were no more than a strip of discarded orange peel. In an odd way I was glad to be reminded. Vanessa put out a languid hand and picked up the diary.

"I hope I don't underestimate you, Mr. Jackson," she said. "But it interests me to know how you, a man newly returned from Canada, could so easily identify Miss Jordan and myself from mere initials."

"Ah, but the right initials. And the dates fit, too. In any case, both of your names appear in full at the start, and it wasn't at all difficult to trace you. You both stand out in a place like this."

Vanessa put up her hand. "Please spare us that, at least," she said. "Let us understand one another, as well as we may. Assuming we are unable or unwilling to meet your terms, am I right in supposing you don't propose to show this—document—to the police? Well, of course not. There'd be no financial advantage to you in that, would there?"

I thought it was time I took a hand. "Oh, Van, why spin it out?" I pleaded. "That's her writing all right. And the less publicity the better. Besides," I wound up in sudden bitterness, "you know that in the last crux you'll pay the price as you've paid it before. The future—the house—what comes next?"

All I wanted now was to get the thing settled and hear Jackson drive away. I was like the fictitious soldier at Agincourt, who had no stomach for the fight. Vanessa was casually leafing through the diary.

"It's too bad your sister didn't have second sight," she observed. "She might have been able to tell you how she managed to slip that day at the critical moment."

"I've wondered about that, too," Jackson agreed. "Life isn't always that obliging. You didn't actually see her fall, did you?" He turned unexpectedly to me.

"It was all over when I got there," I replied. "Just this crowd and the authorities trying to hold everybody back, and everyone talking and shoving—it was horrible."

"Life at second-hand," said Jackson seriously. "Oh, well, I expect if questions were asked, someone would remember your being in the hotel lounge."

This was danger, undisguised, from an unexpected quarter; but once again Van saved the day.

"Let us confine ourselves to such facts as we do possess," she suggested. "I will start by admitting that I should be very much happier to see this diary destroyed. I think, Mr. Jackson, the ball is now in your court. If you will serve, please."

"Meaning how much?" He named a figure. I had realized he was going to pitch it high, but this made Ethel's original demand seem like pennies. Even Vanessa looked dumfounded.

"You're—not joking, I take it?"

He rubbed his thumb and fore-

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finger together, in a suggestive, vulgar gesture. "Never joke about serious subjects," he said. "And what can be more serious than money?"

"And if we find ourselves unable to cope?"

"You find money in the oddest places. I believe Mr. Marshall isn't exactly a pauper."

"You'd get short shrift from him," Vanessa warned.

"Or there's a fellow I know on the Sunday *Recorder*. This would be right up their street."

"Even disreputable tabloids like the *Recorder* have their limits," Vanessa suggested.

"You could be right, but you'd need a telescope to spot 'em. Besides, more things are done by innuendo . . ."

Vanessa threw the diary down as though it were something too corrupt to be handled any longer.

"I appreciate the situation," she said. "Naturally, I shall require some time to consider. I don't ask if I can rely on you not to offer this in any other market until you have our reply, because clearly this so-called evidence couldn't fetch anything like your figure from any other source. Miss Jordan and I—"

He grinned. "You sound like the British Prime Minister, but don't overplay your hand, Miss Freeman. If you think you can stall me till the announcement of the engagement is made, forget it. Let's see. Today's Tuesday. I'll be round again on Friday to collect. Friday's a good night to contact my friend at the *Recorder*—catch the Sunday public, you see—and no nonsense about checks, please. I'm not a legal beagle myself," he added coolly, "but isn't there some kind of penalty for paying a blackmailer to suppress evidence—sort of perjury in reverse?"

"I told you this would happen," I said fiercely. "We burned our boats when we agreed to Ethel Ridgley's first demand."

"Then we must learn to swim even in rough water," Vanessa said quietly. "How good a swimmer are *you*, Mr. Jackson?"

"You ask my Mum, she'd tell you I was born swimming." He grinned.

I saw, if Jackson didn't, that Van was almost at the end of her tether. "You've had a shock," I said. "I'll get a drop of brandy."

She pushed herself to her feet. "I'll get it," she said. "I daresay we could all do with a drop."

"Under safeguards," Jackson agreed, and he sent me that conspiratorial glance again. He moved forward to open the door, and on an impulse I laid a hand on his arm. He couldn't have looked more surprised if a serpent had fastened onto his wrist.

"You don't mind taking chances, do you?" I said, as the door closed behind Vanessa. "If she had used that poker I'd have sworn it was suicide, and I know which of us would have been believed."

"Don't push your luck," he said harshly. We talked for two or three

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minutes while he swaggered about examining Vanessa's treasures. "She's a long time, isn't she?" he suggested. "What's she doing? Doctoring the brandy?"

"She wouldn't insult Dom-Remy like that," I said. "She's probably trying to restore the *status quo*. I suppose it's second nature to you to go round hurling bombs into strangers' backyards—"

"She's as tough as an old boot," said Jackson in scornful tones. "All that fragile air—I bet the Roman matrons looked like her, having a fine time watching the Christian maidens being gored by wild cows. Ever been to the Chamber of Horrors? You'd be surprised at the homely little women, the sort that ask you in for a cuppa, who crushed unwanted kids to death between mattresses or put poison in the old man's nightly cocoa, and never lost a minute's sleep. I can't think how Ethel had the nerve to stand up to her."

The door opened and Vanessa came back, carrying the decanter and three balloon glasses on a silver tray. "I hope I haven't delayed you," she said formally. "I was waiting for the glasses to warm."

"I thought the brandy did that," grinned Jackson.

"The warmth brings out the full bouquet." She picked up the decanter, but he jumped in and took it from her. "Allow me!" He poured the first tot and handed it to her. She drank it deliberately and handed the glass back. "A test case? You give me credit for very little finesse, Mr. Jackson. Please help yourself."

I was convinced this wasn't Van's first glass, and I wished she would let Jackson go away. Then a sound from beyond the window made me start. "Why, it's raining," I exclaimed.

"Yes. Didn't you know? I am afraid you'll have a wet drive home, Mr. Jackson. Still, your car looks as though it could stand up to a storm."

"She gets me from A. to B." Jackson agreed. "You don't mind?" He refilled his glass. "Shouldn't we be drinking a toast?" he suggested.

I burst into sudden laughter. "When shall we three meet again?"

"Friday," he agreed. So we all drank to Friday.

When she came back from seeing him off, Van lay back in her chair like someone dead. Her look frightened me. I had to say something. "So he's gone," I observed idiotically.

"He's gone," Van agreed.

"Till Friday," I amended.

"He's gone. Period."

I turned my head sharply. "What's that supposed to mean? You can't imagine he won't be back."

"He won't be back." Her voice was drained but somehow convincing.

"How can you—did you get hold of the diary then?"

"The diary was never of any importance, just an excuse to get inside the door. People are such ama-

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teurs, Ursula. It's like these mass-produced clothes where all the buttons fall off the first time you put them on. Here he comes with his story of just being home from Canada, but he has a dear friend on a Sunday paper. He tells us that Ethel kept this diary in case of an emergency, but there *was* an emergency and the diary never turned up. Even if the police hadn't shown interest, the sort of spiders who live in shady hotels like The Penthouse would never have sealed it up unread. No, it was never produced at the inquest or anywhere else, because at that time it didn't exist."

"You're full of surprises," I congratulated her, when I got my voice back. "Do you suggest *he* wrote it?"

"I don't know," Vanessa acknowledged, "but I am sure that Ethel Ridgley didn't. Why keep a diary solely for our benefit? What about her other victims? We weren't her first, you know; her behavior throughout bears the stamp of professionalism—she was almost the only professional in the picture," she added under her breath. "Naturally, I didn't recognize the handwriting—but I wonder what made you so sure it was hers? We'd just agreed she'd never put down a word in writing, not so much as her signature. You had me puzzled there, Ursie, but I didn't want to cramp your style, not with your friend present."

"Not my friend," I protested, stung.

"Perhaps friend isn't the correct word. Still, you'll not deny it was due to you that he came here this afternoon. Refill my glass," she added quickly, "and have another tot yourself. We're both going to need it. There comes a point of no return in every situation, what's sometimes called the moment of truth, and I think we're there now. I think, too, you owe me that, and you needn't be afraid of Jackson's vengeance *—because he won't be coming back."*

I didn't recognize my hand holding the decanter, refilling the glasses. It seemed to have a life, a volition, of its own.

"What did you do?" I said.

"I simply advised him to go back by the inland road. I know the coast road is quicker, and by going inland you're apt to get caught in the Lamberwell bottleneck, but it's safer in bad weather. But drivers and brakes both need to be as steady as rocks, particularly on a dark night with the rain falling, and he doesn't know the neighborhood. Of course, I warned him about Dead Man's Morrice."

That was the astounding name of a burnt-out pub standing on the cliff edge, round which various superstitions had accumulated.

"Even you, even I," Van went on, "who know the place like the back of our hands, exercise particular care on that turn. The road suddenly becomes a precipice—"

"Perhaps Mr. Jackson will exer-

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cise particular care, too," I suggested.

But Van only said, "It won't help him. His brakes won't hold."

I knew then why she had been so long fetching the brandy. I could see in my mind's eye those small clever hands of hers working like lightning under the hood, the swift fatal adjustment, the pitiless eyes.

"You should have been the actress," I cried. "Van, it's murder!"

"I warned him to go the other way," she said seriously. I could imagine. The soft, faintly scornful tone, the flashing eye, the cool appraisal of our visitor as someone already slightly out of control—oh, the man wasn't living who wouldn't have defied her then.

"We haven't long to wait," she continued. "Did you see his car? A big showy article as meretricious as himself. But never mind about him, he's not important any more. Tell me why you did it, Ursie—after all these years? Betray me, I mean? And with a—creature—like that?"

You must have read the phrase about the heavens opening, thunder pealing forth, lightning flashing like gold swords, angels and archangels deafening and blinding the human host. It was like that with me.

"I said you didn't need that last glass of brandy," an unfamiliar voice said—my voice.

"I suppose you cooked it up between you," Van went on relentlessly. "You telephone, you said to him, and I'll see to it she answers. And then when he arrived he never even hesitated—he knew at once which of us *wasn't* Miss Freeman. Besides, Caro's engagement. Someone had to tell him—and it wasn't me. You were in his power, weren't you, Ursie? Oh, yes, I could see that, he was exhibiting you like—oh, like someone's prize vegetable marrow. I suppose the fact is he was there that afternoon when you pushed Ethel onto the line."

By now I'd hardly have been surprised if the door had opened and Ethel herself came walking in, all green and moldy from the tomb.

"I wasn't even on the platform." I reminded her.

"That's what you said. But it can't be true. Because there were police there holding back the crowd and you couldn't have got near enough to the edge to see her—she was between the rails remember, and at first she was reported as an unidentified woman—but you knew who it was. You came back to tell me—and how could you know unless you had been there? Was that in your mind all the time—killing her? Or did she say something that signed her own death warrant? Had you agreed to share the two thousand pounds? I've wondered so often. Come, Ursula, the point of no return. You're quite safe. I'm the one person in the world who could never betray you."

Inside me something boiled up and burst; the room was full of streaks of colored light as vivid as

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blood. I heard my own voice shouting.

"You say that?" I yelled. "You, the archbetrayer? Do you know what you meant to me all those years? Meeting you at that party was like my being born again. All that treadmill existence of school, school, school, and then back to my mother, and after she died back to nothing, and suddenly you, giving me life, leading me out of the fog into a sun I thought could never be extinguished. I would have died for you any time during those five years we shared, before you let me see how little I meant, less than Caro, a stupid brainless little bitch who couldn't even settle her own bills. I didn't understand then what you saw in me from that very first day —"

And Vanessa said simply, "I saw a friend."

"A victim," I flashed back. "I suppose it was inevitable. If you'd even consulted me, let me be your partner in that crisis—but, no, you just took my future and threw it to Caro as you'd throw a bone to a dog."

Vanessa looked astounded. "There was never any choice. Caro was my family."

"I thought I was that, the one that sticketh closer than a brother."

"You were my second self," Van told me steadily. "I could never have said that of Caro."

"And so," I plowed on, not daring to meet those eyes, refusing to be lured by that steadfast gentle voice, "I hated you—kowtowing to Ethel Ridgley, involving me in your humiliation. I hated you in inverse ratio to the love, the worship almost, I'd had for you. You should suffer —" My voice was hot like the breath of serpents. "I should watch you writhe, for once I'd hold the cards. Only—you won again, when I realized I wasn't getting any pleasure out of it. I could cut my own heart out, but I didn't break yours, did I?"

"Broken hearts are no more use than broken china. You just throw them away. Was I right about Jackson, Ursie?"

"Are you ever wrong?" I almost screamed. "I thought I had the upper hand, Jackson thought he had, but you've defeated us both. Oh, clever, clever Miss Freeman! I couldn't even defeat Ethel. I'll never forget her mincing away out of the lounge—I won't say goodbye, Miss Jordan, just *au revoir*, I feel we may be very useful to each other in the future, you and I. Even Miss Vanessa Freeman may turn out to be less upstage, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"And that's when you decided to kill her? Oh, Ursie, do you never stop to think? All those eyes, didn't it occur to you that *someone* would see? Where did Jackson come in?"

I remembered sitting in my comfortable empty compartment fifteen minutes later. People were still milling on the platform, questions were still being asked. I hadn't been stopped—no one, I thought, had no-

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ticed me. I'd even managed to recover the parcel that looked like lingerie and actually contained £2000.

And then the door had slid back and there he was, dropping into the corner opposite me and saying, "Do you mind if I smoke?"—though it was a nonsmoker and without even waiting for my reply continuing, "What made you do it? Was she blackmailing you? And what exactly was in that parcel you carried away?"

"If I'd been the topmost actress of the season I couldn't have carried that one off," I cried. "No cue, no hint. I did what I could. 'I'll pull the communication cord,' I said, and he laughed. 'You do just that,' he told me. 'Of course, I'd have to tell them what I saw, and they'd want to examine the parcel—but if you've nothing to fear, why, go right ahead.' I almost died."

"Poor Ursie!" said Vanessa, and now there was no mockery in her voice, only compassion. "I think that's what appealed to me about you that first day. You had such qualities, you cared, but you were such a muddler. Did you never wonder why the best jobs always escaped you? You had the qualifications—but you're a muddler. I'm a natural resolver, I wanted to set you right. And then I found I wanted you the way you were, muddles and all. And I do still."

It was beyond belief. We needs must love the highest when we see it, the faithful heart, love's disciple—but did even his mother love Judas Iscariot? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a goddess. I was in Vanessa's hands and there was no escape . . .

It was a man searching for mussels who found the crashed car and reported it to the police. They didn't find the driver for another two days and by that time his own father might have had doubts as to his identity. It had been a wild night and the rocks round that part of the coast are without pity.

We met the Rectors' wife in the village just after the news broke. She is a little brown wren of a woman, as full of romantic fancies (in spite of her dreary husband) as an egg is supposedly full of meat.

"Another case of don't drink and drive, I suppose," she told us, sighing briskly. "It's what everyone will say, and no one will ever know if he deserves a much more exotic epitaph."

"Exotic?" said Vanessa.

"He could have driven off the cliff edge in the pangs of unrequited love, or be the victim of a revengeful cuckolded husband, like that film at the Odeon that Arthur wouldn't sit through. Its' not often we have a mystery round here, and no one seems especially interested. I mean, what was he doing in this neighborhood at all? Never tell me he came just for the ride. Ah, well!" Conversations with Mrs. Hughes

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usually ended this way. "I've got forty women coming to a Bible tea. And, as Arthur insists on saying, the music goes round and round."

"I never quite know what that means," Vanessa confessed, as the Rector's wife got on her bicycle and shot down the hill.

"That life never stops, not even for tea," I suggested, "and you have to go along with it."

"It's too bad we couldn't have confided in her; I don't think she would have given us away." Vanessa sounded almost as though she meant what she said. "And life with the Reverend Hughes can't be a fireball. Still, this is one of the situations where silence is golden, and we all know how important the gold standard is."

It was a lovely afternoon after two days of storm. Van and I came home through the woods and round the lake where the bluebells were struggling up from their drenched beds. Next month you wouldn't be able to set your foot down without trampling them into the earth. We had the place more or less to ourselves; everyone else was out on the cliff road. "Tourists!" said Vanessa, scornfully.

The telephone was ringing on our return. "Your turn, Ursie," Van said, walking to the drawing room.

I lifted the receiver. "Would that be Miss Freeman?" I didn't know the voice from Adam's.

"Who wants her?" I said.

"Oh, she wouldn't know my name, and it's not really important, is it? Shall we say Smith? I'm a friend of that fellow Jackson—his confidant, you might say. Told me everything, he did. A shocking thing, what happened to him. Such a jovial type to come to such a sticky—well, watery—end. Droll, too. I've got things to say to a dame called Freeman, and if I shouldn't be seen around during the next few days you can send the police dogs to dig in her garden."

"Very droll," I agreed.

"Why I rang—what I mean is, do you think I should tell the police? It might be a good idea to have a meeting with Miss Freeman. I could be along this evening, if that's convenient, and perhaps we could come to some sort of an agreement." And the line went dead.

How odd, I thought, that for once Peggy Hughes should have the last word. "The music goes round and round."

"Who was it?" Van called cosily from the drawing room.

So I went in and told her . . .

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S AS IN SHOOTING

by LAWRENCE TREAT

BECAUSE INSPECTOR MITCH TAYLOR had done this Jemson guy a favor a few months ago, it stood to reason Jemson could do a little something in return. And with him owning a turkey farm and taking a booth in the new Farmers' Market up in the North Hill section of the city, what Mitch promoted for himself was a bird. Eighteen pounds of it, cooked and stuffed and carved, with a flap of skin covering the slices so you could hardly tell it had been cut.

He and Amy had figured it would feed the family for five or six meals, and to fix things up so the two kids wouldn't complain, Mitch and Amy had been telling them how it was going to be Thanksgiving all week long, here in May. The kids cottoned to the idea, and everything was working out pretty good.

Mitch got over to the Farmers' Market around half-past three. He figured he'd pick up the bird and then stop off at home to give it to Amy, and get back to headquarters a little before five. Seeing as how he had to explain what he was doing 'way out here at the edge of the city, he told the despatcher he had a stoolie who'd said to meet him, it probably wasn't much, but still,

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stuff like that you couldn't pass it up. That was Mitch's standard cover when he used the car for himself, or maybe for an errand of Amy's.

He got the bird all right and he had it in his arms and was on his way back to the car when he heard his radio phone buzzing. He shifted the bird so he could hold it in one arm, and with his free hand he unlocked the door and opened it. He put the turkey in back, wedged it up in a corner where it wouldn't slide, then got in front and picked up the phone.

"Taylor, Car Four," he said. "Over."

The despatcher spoke in a businesslike tone. "Signal Nineteen. 8834 Faulkner. Please repeat. Over."

It took Mitch a second or so to answer, on account signal 19 meant a homicide and everybody rolling. He couldn't squirm out of that one, but what about the turkey?

"Nineteen," he said in his high-pitched voice. "8834 Faulkner. On my way."

Faulkner was close by, so Mitch was pretty sure he'd make it ahead of the squad by maybe twenty minutes or so. With the aroma of the bird saturating the car and making it smell like a kitchen, he wondered how soon he could get that turkey to Amy and what would happen if the Commissioner or some of the brass came close enough to get a whiff of it. Because recently, the papers had been howling about what they called "police loot," and the Commissioner was sensitive to that kind of hooey; so this was sure the wrong time to transport a roast turkey on city time and in a vehicle which belonged to the city.

All of which left Mitch with kind of a problem.

He was thinking a little too hard about it, and that was why he didn't see the red sports car come zooming out of a side street and practically tip over trying to swing out of his way. Most times Mitch would have seen or heard the car and been ready for it, but this time it was just about on top of him before he even knew it was there. He pounded down on his brake, swung his wheel hard, and went into a skid that sent him broadside to the little car. It almost careened over, and for a split second it seemed to hang on two wheels. Then it righted itself, bounced off the police cruiser as gently as a canoe, and went racing off.

Mitch finished braking and ended up all alone on the wrong side of the street, at right angles to the curb. He felt like he'd been knocked out and had had his head sloshed with water, then got knocked out again. He emptied his lungs, let the air flow in, slow and full. When he looked up, there was this meek, gray-haired little guy with a nose long enough so you could call it a beak. He must have been up on one of the porches and seen the whole thing, and had come hobbling over.

"Gee whizzickers!" he said. He

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spoke through his nose and he had the hint of a lisp. "Damn crazy driver, he ought to be shot."

Mitch nodded and then turned around to make sure the turkey was still okay, wedged there in the back seat. "Happen to notice his license plate?" Mitch said.

Beak Nose shook his head sorrowfully. "I should have. The police say that's the first thing you should think of, but—"

"Yeah," Mitch said. "That citizen education stuff—a hell of a lot of good it does." Then, before the guy could maybe ask Mitch why *he* hadn't noticed the license number, Mitch said in a businesslike tone, "Let's have your name and address, just in case."

The little guy sniffed, like he was apologizing. "My name is Connie Guss," he said, "and I live right there." He pointed to the house behind him. "962 Moore."

Mitch jotted down the name and address on his pad, glanced up and down the street, shifted into reverse, and backed over to his lane. 8834 Faulkner was just a couple of blocks away.

It was a fair-sized ranch house—say, $30,000 stuff—with landscaping and shrubs that cost a fair amount of dough, but not enough to buy a botanical garden with. A police car was parked in front of the place, and Mitch got out of his car and started up the path.

Lou Saraceno, he was on the uniformed force up here in the Sixth, came out of the house when he saw Mitch, and for a cop who'd been around as long as Saraceno had, he looked pretty shook up.

"What goes, Lou?" Mitch said.

Saraceno let out a long whoosh of breath. "I never seen anything like it in all my life. Mitch, I'm just riding around and patrolling my beat when I get a call to come up here—seems a man named Malcolm Hacket, with one *T*, he reported his wife's missing and will I go and get the facts."

Saraceno wiped his forehead. He wasn't sweating, but he acted like he thought he was. "You know what that usually means," he said. "Most of the time she's been out with the boy friend and forgot to look at her watch. Or else she lost her car keys and she's running around looking for them. Anyhow, I figured on getting a description and checking with the hospitals, and that would be that."

"So what happened?" Mitch asked.

"Look, you're the first one here and I'm still a little—"

"They told me you had a homicide," Mitch said crisply. "Where?"

Saraceno motioned with his head in the direction of the house. "When I walk in," he said, "I find this guy sitting in the living room, the curtains closed and the shades drawn. You can't see much, so I snap on the light, and you know what? This dame is lying there on the floor, right next to him. She's dead. She's

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been shot through the head, so I say to him, 'Did you kill her?' And he says, 'Kill who?' He's looking right at her and he says, 'Kill who?' "

"So?" Mitch said, thinking mostly about the turkey and maybe beginning to get an idea for it. "So he's blind. What else?"

"Blind!" Saraceno said, as if Mitch hadn't spoken. "Blind, and three feet away from the dead body of his own wife, because that's who it is. And when he finds that out, he just says, calm as a cucumber, 'I'm blind, you know.' "

"Then you been inside," Mitch said. "Is there a back door to the kitchen?"

"Around there," Saraceno said, pointing. "What do you want it for?"

"A little something I got to park in the refrigerator for a while," Mitch said. "And if the guy's blind, anything in the refrigerator ought to be pretty safe, huh?"

"Are you nuts, or what?" Saraceno said.

Mitch didn't answer. First things first, he told himself, and went back to the car to get his bird. After he had it stowed away on the bottom shelf of the Hacket refrigerator, that would be time enough to put his mind on the homicide.

The way it turned out, the precinct men were delayed a little and they got to the Hacket house around the same time as Lieutenant Decker and the Homicide Squad, who came all the way from headquarters. So Mitch had time to size things up and ask a couple of questions before anybody else came around. And he wished he'd been the last one on the scene, because what he saw in the living room he was going to keep seeing it nights when he'd be trying to get to sleep.

It wasn't so much what he saw, maybe; it was the idea of the thing. A guy sitting there with his murdered wife, and not even knowing it until somebody told him. Hacket's shoe was just a couple of inches from the pool of blood, and Hacket himself was sitting back in a green chair and not even moving until he spoke to Mitch. He heard Mitch come in and he turned around and called out. "Who's there?" he said. "Please tell me. I'm blind, you know."

Mitch's high-pitched voice cracked a little. "Inspector Taylor, Homicide Squad. You're Mr. Malcolm Hacket?"

"That's right. They tell me something happened to my wife. Is it true?"

"It's true," Mitch said. "How long you been sitting here?"

Hacket hesitated. "About an hour."

"Okay," Mitch said, "and right now you better leave the room for a while. There's going to be a lot of people in here, and you don't want to be in their way."

Hacket stood up. He was about Mitch's height, only darker and with a heavy beard so you could see

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the stubble coming through in patches. Mitch wondered whether the guy shaved himself and maybe Mitch would have asked, only he'd probably be asking questions later on and he didn't want to get too friendly with Hacket.

Anyhow, Hacket stood up, but he didn't move. "Tell me where not to step," he said. His voice was half dead. "I'm blind, you know."

Something in the way he said it irritated Mitch. "Turn around," he said, "and you'll be okay."

Hacket still didn't move, and Mitch walked over to him and took his arm, but Hacket shook loose. "I don't like to be touched," he said sharply.

"Then turn around like I told you to," Mitch said. "I got work to do."

Hacket wheeled and walked out, and Mitch wondered why in hell the guy hadn't done it in the first place, instead of making a fuss. Then Mitch realized Hacket wouldn't know just where the body was lying.

A first impression like this, you got to concentrate and sort of see the whole picture. After that you step back and examine the room section by section, as if it had been marked off in a gridiron pattern. In your mind you section it off and then you study each section separately.

Mitch had just about started what he called a serious look-see when he heard the sirens and knew that the rest of the squad were here. So Mitch didn't have time to do much, but he did tumble to a couple of things, and the first one was the gun. It was lying right there on the carpet on the other side of the room and he walked over, picked it up, and smelled the barrel. Even a kid could have deduced that it had been fired recently.

It was a Colt .32, and he carefully broke it open. Two bullets had been fired. He closed up the gun again, hefted it, then put it down on the carpet the same way it had been before.

He had time to notice the keys hanging on a hook next to a side door which turned out to be the one that led to the garage. But that was as far as he got when Lieutenant Decker and the squad barged in, followed by the precinct lieutenant and some of his boys. And like always, you felt kind of good when the boss walked in. He looked tall and sure of himself and sort of smart and serious. He knew his stuff and he took the responsibility for whatever you did, and backed you to the hilt even when you were wrong—or anyway, if you weren't too wrong.

He came in now and nodded at Mitch, but the body didn't shake him up the way it had Saraceno and and then Mitch, on account Hacket wasn't there any more. This was just one more homicide, so why get excited?

"Done anything yet?" Decker said to Mitch.

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Mitch shook his head. "No, I just got here a little while ago." And he told about Hacket being blind and so on.

The Lieutenant listened carefully, then he leaned down over the body. "I don't see any powder marks," he said. He kept on studying the body, and he spoke without turning around. "Balenky, get one of the neighbors who knew her and can make a positive identification. Taylor, start Hacket off with a few questions, to keep him busy and soften him up. I'll be along in a few minutes."

"Sure," Mitch said.

He knew what Decker wanted. You feel a guy out. Maybe you decide to get tough with him and it doesn't work out, so somebody else comes in and tries a friendly approach. Or maybe it's the other way round. It doesn't matter much, the thing is to start moving and get him off-balance.

Mitch found Hacket sitting in a room that was fixed up as a kind of office. He was talking to someone on a phone, and he was smiling and his voice had timbre and character to it. He was saying something about somebody shouldn't worry, Hacket would see about the binder, the guy could rest easy. But when Hacket heard someone come in, his voice dropped and his face went into a tight mask, and he told whoever it was that he was sorry, he couldn't talk any more. Then Hacket put down the phone.

"What was that about?" Mitch said.

"Business." Hacket's voice was flat and lifeless again. "I'm in the insurance business."

"Get along pretty good?" Mitch said.

"You're Inspector Taylor. I know your voice."

"Get along pretty good?" Mitch said again.

"Yes, I get along quite well. People know me as the blind insurance man. I do all my work by telephone. That way I can't see people and they can't see me, so we're equal. Eyes don't help on the phone, you know."

"Yeah," Mitch said. "But you got to read policies and stuff, don't you?"

"I have a secretary."

"Your wife?"

"No. She used to be, but the business grew and became too much for her. Taking care of the house and of me doesn't leave her time for much else."

"This secretary," Mitch said. "Who is she and where can we get hold of her?"

"Miss Rae Fertig, 777 Howell, Landsdale 4-9763."

"How come she's not here?"

"She wasn't feeling well. She stayed home today."

"Got a gun?" Mitch asked abruptly.

"Yes. A Colt revolver. Thirty-two caliber."

"Where did you keep it?"

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Hacket caught the word and repeated it. "Did?" he said.

"That's right." He didn't explain, and Hacket didn't ask him to.

"I used to keep it in my desk," Hacket said, "and then I moved it to the night table next to my bed. But a blind man has no use for a gun, so I gave it to my wife. I don't know where she put it."

"Was it you who called the police to say your wife was missing?"

"Yes. You know that, so why ask me?"

"Okay," Mitch said. "Let's start out with this morning and tell me just what happened. Was your wife home all morning?"

"No. She took the car somewhere, to go shopping, to market, to see a friend—I didn't ask. She made sure I was comfortable and then she left."

"How did she make you comfortable?" Mitch said.

"She asked me whether I needed anything. I said no, that I'd sit in the garden, as I often do. I sit there and listen to sounds—birds, people talking, cars out on the street and then the hum of an occasional plane. I live through my ears. I'm blind, you—"

"Yeah, I know," Mitch interrupted. "Go ahead."

"That's all. I don't have a very good sense of time, so I can't tell you how long I was there in the garden. But after a while the sun seemed to be straight overhead, so I decided it was around twelve or one, and I went inside. I sat down in my favorite chair and waited. I heard the clock strike two, and my wife wasn't home yet. I began to get nervous. I waited another hour, and when the clock struck three I phoned the police and said my wife was missing. A few minutes later the front doorbell rang. It was a policeman and I told him to come in. I guess you know the rest."

That part of it gave Mitch the creeps, and he kept seeing the blind man sitting there in the half darkness, with the body of his wife practically at his feet. And if Mitch was right, Hacket had shot her.

It must have been quite an ordeal. Sitting there, thinking. Wondering how long he'd have to wait. Wondering how to arrange the discovery. Afraid to leave the house because somebody might see him step outside, and he wouldn't be aware of it. Afraid to go out through the garage, because he might first step in a puddle of blood and leave tracks. And finally getting up and going to the phone and telling the police that cock-and-bull story about his wife was missing.

"Around what time do you think your wife came home?"

"I don't know."

"You heard the car?"

"There were planes, there were trucks passing—I must have been out in the garden when she came home. I didn't hear her."

"If she came home and didn't find you, she would have looked for you, wouldn't she?"

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The blind man thought that one over, then he came out with a lulu. "She must have been shot as soon as she came in," he said.

"You would have heard the shots."

"But I didn't. I suppose a plane must have gone by at that moment."

"You had to hear either the car or the shot. Which?"

"Neither, I tell you."

"Then you heard her come in."

"I didn't."

"*You* shot her. You shot her as she stepped through the doorway and right after she hung up her keys."

"How could I?" Hacket said quietly. "I'm blind, you know."

"That's what I want you to tell us. How?"

"I didn't."

"You hear everything—you live through your ears, you say—but you didn't hear your wife come in, didn't hear her car, didn't hear a shot, didn't hear a third person. Okay. You didn't hear anybody else because there wasn't anybody else."

Mitch was kind of proud the way he had put that together.

"There must have been somebody else," Hacket said.

"How did you feel after you'd shot her and realized you were trapped? You couldn't leave the house. You didn't even dare walk around the living room. How did you feel?"

"I wish you were blind," Hacket said calmly. "Then you'd know how I feel after somebody killed my wife and the police accuse me instead of doing something about it. I wish you were blind."

"You say you sat in the garden," Mitch said. "Okay. There are three chairs out there, and there's a trowel on one of them and a rake leaning against one of the other two, so if you're lying I'm going to know it. Which chair did you sit on?"

"The center one," Hacket said promptly.

"Yeah," Mitch said.

The trap hadn't worked. There were three chairs all right, but none of them had anything on them and Hacket knew it, which meant he'd sat out there in the garden for a while, but it didn't mean he hadn't killed his wife. About all it meant, maybe, was that Mitch had fallen flat on his face.

"What made you come in?" Mitch said.

"I told you. I'd been waiting for her, and it was late and I got hungry." Hacket licked his lips. "I'm still hungry."

"Then go get yourself something to eat," Mitch said.

He would maybe have gone into the kitchen to kind of protect that bird of his, but the Lieutenant called him over.

"Get anything out of him?" Decker asked Mitch.

"Not much," Mitch said, and gave the gist of his interrogation.

"His timing's right," Decker said. "Neighbors saw her leave around

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ten this morning and come back a little before two. I'll have a shot at him and see what I can turn up. About this secretary of his, this Rae Fertig—suppose you go over to her place and sound her out. The news isn't on the radio yet, so play it cagey at first to see if she knows anything about this. If she does—" The Lieutenant didn't finish his sentence.

"Okay," Mitch said, and he looked at his watch.

It was a little after five and he still had the problem of the bird. He figured if he could sneak it out of the refrigerator without the Commissioner or any of the brass catching on, he could get it up to his house in time for Amy to have it for dinner, like she'd planned. It would be cold, but there was nothing wrong with that and the kids were looking forward to it. And what with it being already carved, it would make dinner pretty easy for Amy. Maybe tomorrow Mitch would get a taste of that bird, but right now the problem was to get it out of Hacket's refrigerator.

Mitch took the problem over to Jub Freeman. Jub was the Lab man and a particular friend of Mitch's. A few years ago they'd come out from New York together and their wives got along good and any time Mitch was really up against it, he got hold of Jub. And if an eighteen-pound turkey wasn't important, then nothing was.

Jub was still working on fingerprints, he was going through the house and dusting doorknobs and jambs and so on. Mitch found him in the Hacket bedroom, where Jub was examining a closet. He was on his hands and knees when Mitch came in.

"What are you doing down there?" Mitch said. "Looking for mouse holes?"

Jub moved back and stood up. He was a little taller than Mitch and he had roundish pink cheeks that the squad always kidded him about, and he had a couple of dimples that showed up whenever he stretched his mouth, even if he didn't quite smile. But right now he was all frown.

"Looking for a rat," he said. "Mitch, I've got a funny feeling about this case. That guy—the way he talks and the way he acts, it's almost as if he was challenging us to prove he killed her."

Mitch nodded. "I got the same feeling, except what would he kill his wife for?"

"Money maybe. Or because he has another dame. Why else do men kill their wives—except when they get drunk or jealous?"

"He's got a secretary," Mitch said. "I'm on my way over to see her, but I got a little problem. I got a turkey in the refrigerator."

Jub grinned, and the dimples went deep. "How'd it get there?"

"Had to leave it there for a little while, and you know how a fresh roasted turkey smells. So if I'd left

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it in the car and one of those bloodhounds from upstairs smelled it—"

Mitch didn't finish the sentence. The bloodhounds upstairs were the big brass, who had their offices on the second floor of the headquarters building.

"So you want to bring it outside?" Jub said.

"Sure. Now suppose you needed it down at the lab to make an examination or something, and so you asked me to bring it outside—that might do it."

"Good. I'll tag it for identification and put my name on it."

"Except when the Commissioner smells it and asks what you want it for, what do I say?"

"Tell him," Jub said with a straight face, "that I'm just checking it out, in my usual thorough manner. Tell him you don't know what for, you forgot to ask me."

"Let's have the tag," Mitch said. "And maybe I'd better get Balenky to help me carry it out. Because if anybody saw me walking out all alone with a turkey, they might think I wanted it for myself."

"Absurd," Jud said. "An unselfish guy like you?"

Mitch laughed. "You never know. Some guys, they're just suspicious of everybody and everything."

It worked out—well, not exactly smoothly. Because while Balenky said sure, he'd help carry out some stuff for Jub, when Balenky saw what it was and got a whiff, he caught on that everything wasn't exactly kosher, and the first thing he wanted was a piece of the bird.

Mitch cut that off. "Don't eat the stuff," he said, "it's poisoned. What the hell do you think Jub wants it for?"

"Don't give me that," Balenky said. "I know you—you got an angle somewhere. This bird's no more poisoned than I am." But he didn't touch it. Maybe he didn't believe Mitch, but Balenky didn't take chances unless he had to. Like he always said, the first responsibility of every officer of the law is to stay alive.

The reporters were waiting for an official handout, and when they saw Mitch and Balenky come out carrying something heavy that was covered with a cloth and that had a fine roast aroma, the questions flew thick and fast.

"What's that? Where are you taking it? How was she killed? Do you have any leads?"

Mitch held up his hand. "Give us a break and let us through, will you?"

"Answer some questions first."

"Look," Mitch said. "I'll get my neck chopped off if I say anything without permission. All I can tell you is, this thing, I'm taking it down to the lab. I guess somebody thinks it's poisoned."

One reporter said, "Doesn't smell like poison to me." But the rest of the group let Mitch put the bird on the back seat of his car and drive off.

He figured it would only take

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him ten or fifteen minutes extra to stop off at his house and give the bird to Amy, so he drove fast in order to cut the time down, and he even used the siren a few times. This bird, he told himself, was going to be delivered in style.

He dropped it off at his house and after that things were pretty much back to normal—no personal problems, nothing on his mind, just the regular motions to go through. Stop off and see this Rae Fertig, ask her a few unimportant questions and try to find out if she knew anything about the homicide.

For no reason Mitch could think of, he expected this Fertig female to be pretty sharp. But it turned out she was underweight, underheight, and underdeveloped, too.

She had a two-room apartment, and from the way it was furnished he decided she was pulling down a good salary. He identified himself as Detective Taylor, but he skipped the Inspector part and didn't mention Homicide.

"A few things I'd like to check with you," he said.

Her sallow face looked scared, but then a lot of people get scared when the police come around. "Why?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"Did you go to work for Mr. Hacket this morning?"

"No, I wasn't feeling well. Why—did something happen to him?"

"How long has he been blind?" Mitch asked.

"Since before I've known him, which is about five years. I understand that the accident which blinded him happened about ten years ago."

"Yeah," Mitch said. "You know his wife. How did they get along together?"

"Mr. Hacket and I have a business relationship," she said stiffly. "I know nothing about his personal affairs."

Maybe, Mitch thought. Except when you work in somebody's house you pick up plenty. But he stayed away from that and just kept on probing. "His insurance business pretty good?" Mitch said.

Rae Fertig blew her top. "What do you want?" she shrieked. "You ask questions and you won't tell me anything. *What happened?*"

"Somebody got killed," Mitch said. And she kind of staggered back, held her hand to her chest, and said in a low voice, "Oh—my heart!" And she collapsed on the sofa.

Mitch put her feet up, stuck a pillow under her head, and called for a police surgeon. Then he gave her a glass of water and kind of hung around and watched her until the police surgeon showed up and made his examination. He didn't think Rae Fertig was going to pass out, but her heart was kicking up a little and when he suggested maybe she ought to go to a hospital she jumped at the idea.

It took maybe a half hour for the

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ambulance to arrive, and Mitch held her front door open while she was carried out on a stretcher. He slipped the catch when he had the door open, so when she was outside and said to be sure and close it, he slammed it hard enough to sound convincing. Which wasn't the way the police were supposed to operate, and Mitch knew any evidence he got from the place without a warrant was going to do more harm than good.

Still, if he went in and looked around, it was going to satisfy his own curiosity. Because right now, he couldn't make up his mind. And that attack of hers could be because she knew all about the homicide and the tension was a little too much for her, or it could be because she didn't know anything and the shock kind of got her.

The police surgeon was no help, either. All he said was that she'd get an electrocardiogram at the hospital and no diagnosis could be made until then. Mitch nodded like this was an answer, and he watched the ambulance move off. Then he turned around and went upstairs. There he picked up the phone and dialed his own number.

Amy answered. "Hello?" she said.

"Hello," he said. "How's the bird?"

Her voice, low and teasing, said, "Mitchell, you know perfectly well how good it is."

"Just from the smell?"

"From the taste. That was an awfully big slice you took."

"Me?" Mitch said. "I didn't touch it."

"Well," Amy said, "somebody did. Where are you now?"

"Stopped off to do a little interrogating," Mitch said. "I ought to be home pretty soon, but you never know."

"I'll have sandwiches for you," Amy said. "Turkey." And she hung up. He hung up, too, and looked around the place.

He didn't know what he was after, but he went through her medicine chest and then through her desk and her check book and then a few bureau drawers, and that's how he located the picture of Hacket. It was worn out from so much handling and there were lip prints all over it, and that ticked him off. Because when you kiss somebody's picture practically every night and the guy's married, you can't help wanting to get rid of his wife.

Mitch digested that particular conclusion while he sat down in the only comfortable chair in the joint and looked at the ceiling. Then, because he was hungry, he went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, and what he saw there told him that whatever else, this Fertig dame was no cook. All Mitch got out of his kitchen trip was a slice of last night's precooked pizza, which was a rough job of chewing, and a bottle of ginger ale they'd taken the calories out of.

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He drank it while he sat down at the phone and reported to the Lieutenant. Mitch repeated pretty much word for word what the Fertig dame had said. "The thing that stands out," Mitch said, finishing up, "is that when she went into that faint when I told her somebody got killed, she forgot to ask who. And I didn't push it."

The Lieutenant listened without saying much, except at the end he told Mitch to go home and get some sleep; the work was piling up for tomorrow and Mitch was going to handle plenty of it.

He got home after nine, and the kids were asleep and he was hungry. Amy had the sandwiches ready, like she'd said, and he washed them down with a couple of beers. At first they didn't mention the case and Mitch was glad to lay off it, on account Amy always had ideas about a homicide and they were usually 'way out. Still, he knew she'd get around to the case eventually and after a while she did. She kind of slid into it, without seeming to.

"That blind man," she said. "Who's going to cook for him?"

"How do I know?" Mitch said, kind of laughing. "Worried?"

"No, but he has to eat, doesn't he? And if his wife cooks for him, he wouldn't go and kill her, would he?"

"Look, Amy, when people go off their rockers and commit murders, they don't think about eating."

"But *you* think he killed her, don't you?"

"If he'd held the gun close to her I'd be pretty sure of it. But she was shot from a distance, and a blind man couldn't do that. Impossible."

"My oculist disagrees with you," Amy said. "He told me that blind people do amazing things, sometimes. He said that so long as the optic nerve is still there, they develop what he called a kinesthetic sense that tells them where objects are."

"So that a blind guy could hit a half dollar at twenty feet?" Mitch said.

"Yes. He said precisely that. A blind man *could* hit a half dollar at twenty feet. Not every blind man, of course, but some of them could."

Mitch stared at his wife. "You mean you asked him exactly that question? What for?"

"I thought it might come in handy some time, just in case."

Mitch just shook his head.

In the morning Lieutenant Decker held his regular session in the Squad Room, with the full squad in attendance. He started off by summing up what had been found out so far.

"The precinct's searching the area for clues," he began. "Or anyhow, they say they are. The M.E. says Mrs. Hacket was killed around two p.m., which means any time between one and three. Jub says the bullet that killed her came from

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Hacket's gun, which is the one we found on the floor. But two bullets were fired and we don't know where the other one went, or when it was fired. The hospital says his secretary, Rae Fertig, is okay.

"Hacket went blind ten years ago, as the result of an accident, and he says he hasn't been under a doctor's treatment for the last five years. His wife was not shot from close up, so either Hacket didn't kill her or else he's a genius and evolved a complicated mechanism that's beyond my powers to reconstruct. So far, anyhow."

The squad kicked that one around and came up with some real whoppers—like how Hacket could have put the gun in a vise and aimed it along a string to the exact spot where his wife's head would be when she came in from the garage and hung up the car keys. Another lulu was maybe he'd rigged up a box and set the gun in it, pre-aimed, and when she put her keys on the hook it pulled a string that triggered the gun.

Mitch let them go along for a while, and then he stepped on that whole approach. "What would he have to do all that for?" he asked. "All he had to do was pick up the gun, aim it, and shoot. He could hear her come in, and as for aiming—blind men get a kind of kinesthetic sense." He stumbled a little over the word, so he repeated it. "Kinesthetic."

A couple of the boys started to laugh him off, but the Lieutenant was impressed. "Interesting idea," he said. "I'll look into that."

Balenky had a different slant on the case. He went for the simplest solution, that some crook had come into the house and Mrs. Hacket heard him and got the gun before she walked in on him. The crook made a pass at the gun, they had a fight, and she got shot, so check the files on burglars and take it from there.

But Bankhart pointed out that, with all the noise, Hacket would have heard something and known his wife was dead, or wounded. For himself, Bankhart thought Hacket might have been having an affair with this secretary of his, and she wanted to marry him but she had to get the wife out of the way first.

They argued along on that for a while, but about all they agreed on was, Hacket was holding out, he was the key to the interrogation, but they needed more evidence before they tackled him head-on. The Lieutenant said they'd go after that evidence full steam, and he gave most of the squad telephone work—call everybody in Hacket's business file and find out if they'd spoken to him yesterday or called him or tried to. With that much out of the way, the Lieutenant picked up some reports the precinct had turned in.

"One of these," Decker said, tapping a sheet, "says somebody saw a man running from the general direction of the Hacket house with a

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dog chasing him, and another one says some woman claims she saw a red sports car race down the street. She's not sure of the time, but it almost collided with another car at the corner, and then went on without stopping."

Decker clipped the two sheets together and handed them to Mitch. "They sound like rumors, but you'd better check into them. And pick up anything else you hear, although the precinct men are supposed to be checking that, house to house."

Mitch said okay, took the reports, and wondered whether that red car could be connected with the homicide, after all. If so, he could be in trouble and he'd better watch his step until—

He stopped thinking about the red car as the Lieutenant held up a paper with the headline: *Investigate Poisoning in Hacket Murder.*

"Anybody know anything about this?" he asked.

There was a kind of silence for a couple of seconds, and then Mitch spoke up. "Looks like some reporter goofed," he said. "The imaginations some of 'em got!"

"What did they imagine from?" Decker asked coldly.

"Me and Balenky took this turkey out to the car, that's all. The rest—some reporter must have dreamed it up out of nothing."

"What were you doing with a turkey?" Decker asked, and you could tell he'd practically guessed the whole business.

Jub answered. "I wanted to check the turkey for possible poisoning," he said. "A whole turkey, eighteen pounds of it, in a house where only two people live—it seemed a little unusual."

"The Commissioner had me on the wire this morning," Decker said. "He says if there's evidence of poisoning he wants to know about it. And if there isn't, how come this headline?"

"It turned out there was no poison," Jub said...

"Brother!" Decker exclaimed. "What happened to the turkey?"

Mitch answered dead-pan. "Seeing as how it wasn't evidence, and after that bulletin we got last week about departmental waste, we couldn't exactly throw it out. So—well, we ate it."

"I'll inform the Commissioner," Decker said, "that some of my men risked their lives checking out a poison theory. Possibly you'll get a citation out of it. And possibly not."

Mitch played it straight. "I wouldn't want to take all the credit," he said.

Decker folded up the paper. "You won't get it," he said, and the squad burst out laughing, and that was the end of the session.

Out in the garage where Mitch picked up his regular car, the mechanic pointed to a long gash on the door, along with some red paint marks. "Anything happen?" he said. "We got to report on all accidents. Otherwise, no fix up."

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Mitch didn't answer directly, on account sometimes a direct answer can pin you down. "Them hydrants," he said mildly. "Every damn one of them, they're painted red." And he started off.

When he got to Faulkner he saw a squad car parked in front of the Hacket place, and farther down the street he spotted a police cruiser. Lou Saraceno was coming out of a house across the street from it. Mitch pulled up at the opposite curb, and Saraceno crossed over and said hello.

"What's cooking?" Mitch asked.

"Nothing much," Saraceno said. "You know how it is with a blind man—the Hackets didn't mix much. There's some talk about a dog, but the neighborhood's full of 'em and everybody saw a different kind. If you ask me, anybody that didn't see a dog just wasn't looking." He pointed to a small terrier sniffing at a tree. "There's one right now."

They talked about dogs for a while, and then Saraceno motioned at the woods behind the houses and said a kid had been lost in there a couple of weeks ago and a dog had found him. And with all that talk, it kind of set Mitch's mind off.

"Suppose," he said, "that dog everybody's talking about was chasing the murderer. Then you line up all your suspects and get hold of the dog and watch which one it goes after. You'd maybe crack your case, wouldn't you?"

"Sure," Saraceno said, "but how would you know which dog? They got so many of them around here."

"There's a little lame guy around the corner from here, on Moore, he might know something. I'll go see."

"Connie Guss?" Saraceno said. "Good idea. He's around all day, sees what's going on. He used to be a motorman on a street car, when they had them over on Lincoln. Retired now."

Mitch drove around the corner and found Guss sitting on his front porch and looking dead-beat. He kind of lifted one hand to greet Mitch, then let it drop. Mitch came up the steps and said, "Morning."

Guss muttered something or other, and Mitch said, "Anything wrong?"

"My dog. He's a Doberman named Kirby and he didn't come home last night. It's the first time he ever stayed away overnight, and when I called the police, you know what they said? They said they had more important things to do." Guss bit his lip. "Gee whizzickers!" he said.

"When did you last see him?" Mitch asked.

"Yesterday afternoon. I saw this man running into the woods behind my house, the woods between here and Faulkner, so I said to Kirby, 'Go sic 'em!' And he went."

"And just disappeared?" Mitch said.

"That's right."

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"Tried to find him?"

"It's a long walk through those woods, for somebody like me." Guss held out one leg as if lifting it up proved how lame he was. "Besides, I'd get lost in there, like that kid did a couple of weeks ago. But Kirby found him. I said to Kirby, 'Go find him,' and Kirby did. He loves kids."

"This guy he chased in the woods —get a good look at him?"

"Not too good. He got in the woods before I could put Minnie on him."

"Who's Minnie?" Mitch asked, getting a little tangled up.

"My telescope," Guss said proudly, as if he'd invented the thing. "I got a telescope on my back porch, and I see plenty. And I know a few things about the Hackets, too."

"For instance?" Mitch said.

Guss shook his head. "I don't want to get mixed up in that business, and I don't like saying things against people. Not me."

"Sure," Mitch said. "But suppose I send you downtown to see Lieutenant Decker and tell him about your dog. Maybe he could do something about it."

"Him?" Guss said. "The Chief of Homicide? You think he'd help?"

"I'm pretty sure he would," Mitch said, "if you answered a couple of questions about the Hackets."

"Well," Guss said, "I don't know about that. Nothing much I can tell."

"Show me where you saw Kirby chasing this guy," Mitch said, "and then I'll fix it up for you to get a ride downtown and see the Lieutenant. Okay?"

Guss wasn't exactly enthusiastic, but Mitch phoned headquarters. The sergeant said he'd get in touch with the Sixth and have them send a car around to pick up Guss, and about ten minutes later the sad little guy hobbled down the porch and climbed into a patrol car. The next thing on Mitch's list was to check on this report of how some dame named Mrs. Sarah Pocatelli had seen a red sports car, and he had the problem of either making her think she hadn't, or else convincing her the red sports car wasn't worth bothering with.

Anybody who's done any investigating, and Mitch had done plenty, has sense enough to know that you don't mess around with stuff that can hurt you. You forget about it as long as you can. So, seeing as how Mrs. Pocatelli could wait, and how in any case somebody ought to look for that dog, Mitch made that his next business. He went out to the Guss backyard and headed for the woods where Guss said Kirby had gone.

The way it turned out, the woods were a little thicker and there was more of them than Mitch had expected. While he didn't exactly get lost, he kind of misplaced his sense of direction and wandered around for a while, which was how he happened to find the dog.

It was dead all right, and on ac-

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count it was a Doberman it was a pretty good guess this was Kirby. There was blood at the mouth and what was maybe a swelling on the side of the head, although you couldn't be sure unless you were a vet. Still, Mitch bent down and studied the dog, and that was how he noticed the snip of gray cloth caught in its teeth. There wasn't much of the stuff, but it looked enough of a sample from somebody's pants for Jub to be interested in examining it.

Mitch was trying to figure out how he'd get out of there when he heard a noise like somebody walking and stepping on leaves and branches, and then stopping for a few seconds and then starting up again. It wasn't kids because kids talk, and it wasn't somebody out for a walk or going in a straight line. It was more like somebody looking for something.

Mitch waited. He waited about five minutes, and then the sounds seemed to be going off in another direction, so he lowered his head, held up his arms to keep from getting his face scratched by low branches, and went bulling straight forward.

Whoever it was must have heard him, because suddenly the noises stopped and then started up again but without that thrashing around. It seemed like this other guy was doing pretty much what Mitch was doing, trying to travel in a straight line and having a tough time of it. Mitch, trying to follow, kept stopping every few seconds to listen and figure out where the other guy was. Mitch was doing all right, too, until all of a sudden there were no sounds at all. Which meant this other guy was hiding.

Mitch went slower after that, and Indian-fashion he kept looking for signs. Not that Mitch was much of a woodsman—he'd been born and brought up in New York, but his kid Joey was a cub scout and the other afternoon when Mitch came home, Joey had been in the woods somewhere and he knew all about trailing and tracking, and told Mitch. So Mitch knew what to look for, like broken branches and crushed leaves, and after a while he found shoe prints in a muddy spot and then a well-worn path that led to a clearing. There, Mitch stopped and looked up, and he was practically standing underneath a sort of treehouse.

What it was was a platform nailed into the branches of a tree. It was a little lopsided and had low walls and a pretty good roof, but there was no ladder or any other way up, which made Mitch pretty sure his suspect was up there and had the ladder with him. So Mitch called out.

"Hey, you!" he yelled. Nobody answered. Since Mitch didn't expect anyone to, he said, "I know you're up there. Better come on down."

He got the same no-answer, so he took out his gun. "Come down," he

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said, "or I'll start shooting." He held the gun high and in front of him, so it could be seen real easy. "I'll count to ten," he said, "and then I'll shoot."

He got up to five when he heard movement. At seven a head popped into view and a voice said, "I'm coming down, if that's what you want."

Mitch stopped counting. "Yeah," he said. "That's the idea."

The guy who came down looked well fed, and he had a big round head without much hair on it, and large serious eyes that were plenty worried. The guy dropped a rope ladder down from his platform and climbed down so awkwardly he almost fell off. He was out of breath when he made it to the ground.

"Who are you?" he said. "And what do you want?"

"Police," Mitch said, and showed his identification. "And I got a few questions to ask."

"You have no right to. I've done nothing illegal."

"Look," Mitch said, "don't get smart. There was a homicide in this neighborhood yesterday, and anybody hiding in the woods is going to be lucky to stay out of jail."

"I wasn't hiding."

"No kidding?" Mitch said. "You just carry a tree house around with you for the fun of it."

"I'm a lawyer," the guy said, "and I know what my rights are."

"Okay," Mitch said. "Section Eighteen-A—suspicious behavior near the scene of a crime. Besides that, you're trespassing, you evaded an officer of the law, and there's a dead dog with a piece of somebody's pants in his teeth, and I want to know if it's yours."

The guy laughed and turned around. "Have a look," he said.

"All I want to look at right now," Mitch said, "is your identification. Let's see a driver's license, for instance."

It was in a plastic compartment of the guy's wallet, and he handed it to Mitch. The name was Harry Riegelman and the address was 593 Parker Place, and he had a vehicle registration in the wallet for a red Sunbeam convertible, and that made things pretty tight.

Mitch returned the wallet. "What were you doing here yesterday afternoon? Here or somewhere nearby."

Riegelman answered confidently. "I wasn't here, or anywhere in the vicinity."

"Mr. Riegelman, I got red paint on my car and you got black paint on yours and they match up, and any time I want to collar you on a hit-and-run I can do it. So you got a lot of things to tell me."

Riegelman assumed that cautious expression. "I have nothing to say."

"Let's look at it this way," Mitch said. "Here we are, just the two of us, and we're about the only ones that know about that traffic business. And while I can't guarantee anything, I think I got a way so my report on that accident could get lost.

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And I'm willing to give it a try, if you tell me what you came for and what you were doing around here yesterday."

"What choice do I have?" Riegelman said bitterly. It wasn't exactly a question, so Mitch didn't answer, and Riegelman went on talking. "I was hoping to avoid the necessity of explanations, but you're forcing my hand. I was a friend of Mrs. Hacket's as well as her lawyer. She came to me a few months ago and asked me to get her a divorce. She was through with her husband and wanted a complete break."

"What did Hacket have to say to that?" Mitch asked.

"He sneered at her. Can you imagine a wife succeeding in getting a divorce from a blind man who depends on her for a hundred essential things? Not a chance in the world of her getting free—except that Hacket isn't blind."

Riegelman came out with it like he thought it would knock Mitch for a loop—and it did. Only, because he'd heard plenty of wild ones and knew how to field them, he didn't show it. Maybe he had a hunch that this one was solid, but anyhow, there was no sense in getting excited.

"Who says so?" he asked, and he kept his voice quite matter-of-fact. "And how do you know?"

"Climb up there and look," Riegelman said, pointing up to the platform.

Mitch didn't fall for stuff like that. "Just tell me about it," he said, "and later on I'll go check."

"Hacket built that tree house and did it all by himself. He has a mattress and some books up there, and not in Braille, either. I was looking at them when you arrived."

"Just find out about him?" Mitch asked.

"No. Mrs. Hacket was almost certain that he could see, and she told me about it, but there was no proof. He'd kept up the sham for so long that it was second nature to him, and it was virtually impossible to trick him into giving himself away."

"He'll slip up," Mitch said, thinking of the turkey. If Hacket had forgotten himself that time, he'd do it again.

"Mrs. Hacket had seen him do things when he thought no one else was in the house, but it was only her word against his. We decided I'd hide outside the house some afternoon when he thought he was alone and take pictures of him through a window. Yesterday afternoon I came for that purpose.

"I reached the house about three, coming from Moore. The shades were drawn in the living room, but not quite all the way down, and I looked inside. Hacket was sitting in the green chair and Mrs. Hacket was lying there in front of him. She was dead. It was a terrible sight, and I left. I skirted the woods and suddenly this dog chased me. He was a big dog and I don't trust Dober-

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mans, and he came at me. I beat it into the woods, but the dog kept attacking and pushing me back. Then all of a sudden he lunged and took a nip out of my pants."

"Gray?" Mitch said, interrupting.

"That's right. I was scared of my life then, and I still had my heavy tripod. I swung it and hit him as hard as I could. It bounced out of my hand and I lost my camera at the same time, but I didn't wait to look at the dog. I just ran, and I didn't know whether it was following me or not. I wanted to get away from the dog and the murder and everything else, and when I got in my car, I guess I was still in a state of shock. I drove off, I don't even remember my trip home except that somewhere along the line I almost hit another car and that I kept going. It seems it was your car."

"What did you come back for?" Mitch asked.

"My camera. There were pictures in it of Mrs. Hacket and myself, and I couldn't risk the chance of its being found."

"On account you and Mrs. Hacket were a little too friendly?" Mitch said. Riegelman didn't answer, and Mitch went on. "A guy who could see but went on pretending he was blind—what for? Didn't he enjoy seeing things?"

"Business," Riegelman said. "He was known as the blind insurance man. People were sorry for him and let him handle their insurance. If they realized he wasn't blind, they'd have taken their business somewhere else, and exposed him as a fraud and a cheat."

"Okay," Mitch said. "Now let's go up to this tree house and see if everything's like you said." He sort of patted his gun so Riegelman could see it. "You first, Mr. Riegelman."

The guy started climbing and he almost fell on top of Mitch, but otherwise everything seemed all right. The books were there along with some stuff that looked like it belonged to Hacket, so Mitch and Riegelman came down. They took the path that led to the clearing, and at the other end it was pretty well concealed by some pines, which was why nobody had caught onto Hacket's secret hideaway.

On the trip downtown to headquarters Mitch did a little thinking and a little talking, and he kind of got the Hacket background from this Riegelman. All in all his story sounded pretty straight, but suppose it wasn't? Because there was nothing to prove anything he'd said. All Mitch really knew about Riegelman was he'd almost run into Mitch yesterday. And if Riegelman was the guy the dog had chased, maybe Guss could identify him.

With that in mind and maybe a little more, because Mitch didn't like to do things too direct and because when you asked somebody if he could identify somebody else they always said yes, sure, Mitch said, sort of off-hand, "This Guss guy who owns the dog—"

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"I've seen him," Riegelman said. "Him and his mutt!"

"Guss loved that animal," Mitch said. "Better tell him how sorry you are."

"Why? What for?"

"It'll be in the papers how you killed his dog. He's going to know all about it, so you may as well tell him it wasn't your fault. Might save you a little trouble later on."

"Thanks," Riegelman said. "Maybe you're right. And I won't forget what you're doing about that accident, so any time I can do a favor for you, let me know."

"Sure," Mitch said. If Riegelman had been in the grocery line or in children's clothing or something like that, it would have been okay, but what was Mitch going to need a lawyer for? Still, he had no complaints, and it looked like things were beginning to shape up for him. He was getting by without having to report the accident, and his assignment about the red car was taken care of, so what more could he ask?

Mitch parked Riegelman in the Squad Room and told one of the boys to take care of him, while Mitch went to see Decker. The Lieutenant was busy, which gave Mitch a chance to find out what had been happening around here, and it was plenty. First of all, they'd gone through Hacket's files and found somebody who'd phoned him yesterday morning and talked to Rae Fertig at the office, same as usual. She denied being there at first, but the Lieutenant warned her she'd better realize she was in a serious hole. She was in love with Hacket, which gave her a motive; she had access to the gun; she was on the scene; and she'd lied to the police right down the line, and they could prove it. At that, she broke down and threw another heart attack, only the electrocardiograph said no.

Around that time Connie Guss had showed up and they had an easy time with him. He said he watched the Hackets through his telescope and he'd seen Mrs. Hacket crying lots of times, and once or twice he'd seen Rae Fertig and Hacket alone and he wasn't just dictating letters, either. So what it added up to was, Rae certainly could have killed Mrs. Hacket, except if Hacket had known, why would he have been sitting there in that room, all alone with his wife's body?

Then the Lieutenant opened his door and called out to Mitch to come on in if he had anything, which Mitch certainly did. He went into the little cubicle of an office, sat down, and let go his bombshell.

"I ran into something you ought to know about," Mitch said. "It seems Hacket isn't blind. He's been faking it."

Decker nodded like he knew all about it, that it was no news to him. "Right," he said. "I never did believe he hadn't seen an eye doctor in five years, so I've been having eye specialists checked, here and in

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some of the major cities, and just five minutes ago I struck pay-dirt. A doctor in Chicago says Hacket consulted him once a year, and paid cash. Hacket had suffered from a hysterical blindness for about two years, after which, partial sight returned and he's been able to see fairly well for quite some time."

Mitch blinked. Here he'd come up with something sensational, and it turned out the Lieutenant had the same information. Still, Decker was impressed enough to give Mitch a kind of funny look and say, "How'd *you* tumble to it?"

"I got a guy outside," Mitch said, and he told briefly what Riegelman had said. "I figured you'd want to take it from there."

The Lieutenant agreed. "That tree house changes everything," he said thoughtfully. "It means that Hacket could really have been away from the house at the time of the murder, with or without Rae. So suppose he returned from his tree house and found his wife's dead body. Then, to maintain his pose as a blind man, he had to let someone else find her, so the poor miserable jerk sat there in front of her, and waited and waited. When nobody came and he couldn't stand waiting any more, he picked up the phone and reported his wife as missing. But if that's right, then who did kill her?"

"Better see Riegelman," Mitch said. "I kind of saved him for you."

"Thanks," the Lieutenant said drily. "I'll see what I can do with him, while you go back to the woods and get hold of Riegelman's camera and the body of that dog. After Jub examines them, we'll have a better idea of exactly where Riegelman fits in."

"Want me to take somebody along with me?" Mitch said.

"Take Art." Art was the photographer and he'd make a record of everything. "And I'll call the Sixth and get some men to help out. They can meet you at the Hacket house."

Maybe Mitch wasn't much of a woodsman at that, because it took him a couple of hours to locate the dog and then the camera, and it was late when he got back to headquarters. It seemed things were still kind of complicated, but there was nothing much new. Riegelman was a smart cookie and knew his rights, and he was still being interrogated.

Hacket was down the hall somewhere and he'd admitted he wasn't blind, but he claimed that he and Rae had been in the tree house at the time of the murder. Despite the lies they'd handed out, he insisted they were innocent of the crime. Right now, the Commissioner himself was questioning Rae upstairs, and Connie Guss was hanging around the outer office and still trying to get somebody to help him find Kirby.

Mitch sat down next to the little guy and told him his dog was dead and somebody had killed him, but they didn't know who. Guss kind

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of wilted at the news, and Mitch was wondering whether to send Guss home when the Lieutenant stepped out of his office.

"Oh, brother!" he said, and sneezed hard. At the same time, as if it was some kind of signal, Balenky came out of the Squad Room with Riegelman in tow, and Bankhart came out of the washroom with his jacket off.

Mitch nudged Guss and said, pointing at Riegelman, "Know him? Is he the guy your dog chased?"

Guss barely looked up, but Riegelman stopped. "I'm sorry about your dog," he said to Guss, "but I hope you understand. I had to."

Guss answered like he hardly heard. "Had to what?" he said.

"Had to kill your dog."

This time the words registered. and little Guss let out a gasp and then he jumped up like he'd been goosed. "You!" he yelled. "You—"

Then he saw the gun snugged under big Jim Bankhart's armpit. Guss made a dive for that gun and got one hand on the holster before Bank clamped down and hugged Guss so hard he couldn't move. But he kept on yelling.

"Let me go—he killed Kirby—he ought to be killed, too—like her—"

"What about her?" Bank said, still holding the little guy in a bear hug.

"She shot at Kirby," Guss screamed, and he began to drool at the mouth. "I saw her do it, I saw it through my telescope, and I went over there and accused her. She still had the gun and we got into an argument over it and it went off. And it served her right!"

"*You* killed her?" Bank said, kind of gawking over the words. He was smart enough most of the time, but right now it came as a big surprise to him the way Guss blurted it all out. Seemed the neighbors had always complained about Kirby, that nobody understood Kirby. But Mrs. Hacket had no right to shoot a gun and scare Kirby that way. Sure it frightened him. That's why he had to protect Kirby—

The little guy was still screeching when they dragged him off to calm him down a little, before ironing stuff out and getting him to sign a statement that would stick.

By the next day things were finally cleared up, but what bothered Mitch was that meeting between Guss and Riegelman and whether the Lieutenant had deliberately arranged it and expected it to pan out the way it did, or whether it was all just an accident. Only Decker wasn't going to say, so it looked like nobody was ever going to have the answer to that one.

It was like Mitch telling Riegelman to apologize for killing the dog, which had triggered it all off. And whether Mitch had sensed what would happen, or whether he'd just been lucky—nobody was going to have the answer to that, either.

Except Amy.

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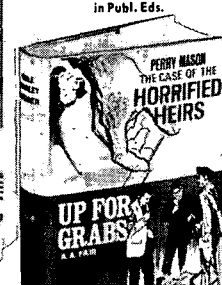

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